

## tidal pools and stars

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## tidal pools and stars

by [passmethemolly](#)

### Summary

"Promise me," George says, holding out his slender pinky to Dream with his eyes still gazing up to the sun, "that you won't actually fall in love."

Dream hesitates as he looks down at the pinky in front of him. One week with George is far from enough time to develop that kind of feeling, right? But still, he hooked his own pinky around George's cautiously, wondering why George even thought that in the first place.

"Trust me, I promise," he responds. George turns to look at him with a slow smile spreading on his face as the salty wind blows around them, seaspray kissing their faces. Dream grins back at him, but he couldn't help but feel like he just made a horrible, terrible mistake.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Or Dream signs him and George up for a couple's getaway in the Florida Keys and things kinda snowball from there.

### Notes

as i said on my twitter, fake dating au's will remain superior.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

June 12

12 p.m

Okay, okay.

Let's get one thing straight: this was an accident—a hilarious and awkward one, but still completely accidental. And honestly? Seeing the look on George's face when he slowly handed the invite to him was totally worth the embarrassment.

"Dream."

"Mhm?"

"What is this?"

They were sitting outside of the airport with their suitcases next to their bench. The air was thick and muggy, and both of them were sweating their asses off as they waited for their Uber to pick them up. Luckily, the wind would blow here and there to prevent them from dying of heatstroke.

"It's a funny story," Dream starts as George reads the paper email he printed out. "So, a few weeks ago, a manager of this resort emailed me and said he really liked our videos."

"Oh no," George mumbles. Oh good, he was already picking up on things.

"And I was like 'Oh, thanks! That means a lot; I'll be sure to tell George that,' and then- oh my God," Dream says. He pauses to scratch his eyebrow as he musters up enough courage to finally blurt out: "And then he said that he and his marketing team would love to have us stay at their resort for a week in exchange for interviewing us about it during our stay."

George's eyebrows furrow and he looks at Dream. "That's not...that bad? I mean, I don't know why you made me wait until we got all the way to Miami to give me this."

"Just...keep reading."

George studies him for a second, but Dream did anything to avoid eye contact as his friend slowly scanned the invite confirmation email, stating what they were doing and where they needed to go. Granted, at the time, it was a good deal. A full week at some new five-star resort in the Florida Keys, and all they had to do was sit pretty and say that they loved it there at the end of every day. No payment for the room or passes, no hassle. Except for one tiny detail.

"Wait- *boyfriend?!'*" George yells, pulling the paper closer to his face. Dream cringes and hides his face in his hand. "Dream, I-! I don't even know what to-"

"Relax! Relax, I'm not asking you out!"

"Why does it say 'you and *your boyfriend* are welcomed guests?!'"

"Because they think we're dating."

George falls silent as he gawks at the paper in his hands. Dream wanted to crawl into himself because one: this situation was humiliating and showed how easy it was to make him give in to

doing something, and two: he felt bad for George. He dragged his friend all the way from London to stay a minimum of three days in his house before throwing him back on a plane to Miami. Now, he just found out he was posing as Dream's boyfriend at some random resort. Not his proudest moment, but surprisingly, not his worst.

"So..." George says slowly, "this guy invited you to promote his resort...because he thinks we're dating..."

"It's a couple's resort technically. I've heard my parents talk about it months ago when they first opened, and when they emailed me, they said that we were a good pair to mirror the paradise that is the-"

"Moonlight Resort," George finishes for him, reading the name at the top of the paper.

"Yep."

"Dream, we aren't dating."

"Obviously, yeah. We aren't."

"Well, you clearly told them otherwise. Why'd you even bring me up?"

"I didn't! I told you, they watched our stuff and they just thought we were dating, so they offered this to me."

*"And you said yes?!"*

"Hell yeah, I did! It's a week in the Keys and we don't have to pay for anything except souvenirs."

George folds the printed email and gives it back to him, already looking tired of Dream's shit.

"You're an idiot. I can't believe you didn't correct them."

"Come on, George! It'll be fun! There's room service..."

"I don't care! I don't wanna be your boyfriend."

"So, we'll lie!"

"What?"

Dream leans back on the bench. This could work. They're only allowed on the property because they were supposed to be dating, and if they wanted a happy couple for their little marketing project, then they can give that to them, right? As soon as they show up as friends and try to clear the air, they'll be kicked out because that's not who they're looking for. All they needed to do was hold hands during interviews and pose cutely for the camera to secure their week of paradise.

"You're thinking- what are you planning, Dream?" George says, reading his expression. Dream gives an easy shrug and looks up to the sun.

"Yeah, why don't we lie? We say that we're dating and then we'll put on a cute gay show for their camera."

George's cheeks turn bright red and he closes his eyes as he hears those words come out of Dream's mouth. "That is so stupid."

"But it'll work. Do you really wanna get there and then have to turn back around and spend the rest

of your time at my house? Sleeping on the couch? Watching bad cable movies?"

"I liked the movies."

"No, you didn't, liar. Stop finding excuses to stay back and just accept the fact that this is happening and it's way better than my place."

George's lips press into a tight line. "I dunno, Dream. I don't want to lie to these people. I mean, what if we slip up?"

"We won't. It's only for when they talk to us. Other people won't know or care. It's a couple's resort, but other people go as friends all the time."

"...You sure?"

"Positive," he lies. He really didn't know. But that seemed to ease George a bit, so he just ran with that made up fact and hoped it checked out well.

"Ugh, alright. But we are making rules here, okay?"

There were a lot of rules.

They had four hours to drive from Miami to the Keys and after their Uber dropped them off at the car rental place, they hopped in and started planning pretty much immediately. George wouldn't make eye contact with Dream as they sped down the Overseas Highway, clear blue water churning beneath them.

"-I also don't want to share a drink with you. Even if it's for a stupid photo, I'm not doing that," George states and Dream rolls his eyes.

"Okay, so, no kissing-"

"Duh."

Dream holds up a finger from the wheel, keeping track of the mental list they had going on. "No hugging, no cuddling, no touching below the waist-"

"Especially the knees. If you touch my knee, Dream, I will kill you."

"Got it. And then no sharing drinks."

"Also, no sharing a bed."

"Okay, George, it's a couple's resort. They're gonna have one bed."

"I don't care. I'll sleep on the floor." Dream opens his mouth to say that he wouldn't let him do that, but then he remembers that George can and will fall asleep anywhere, so he drops it.

"What about putting an arm around your shoulders?" Dream asks.

"That falls under hugging, so no," George responds. Dream sneaks a glance at him. George's brown hair was messy from the wind coming from the sunroof above them, but he was too busy gazing out at the green on the horizon. Again, refusing to look in Dream's direction.

"What about eye contact?"

George spares a quick glance. "What?"

"C'mon, George. You've barely looked at me since I told you about the resort."

"Maybe because I was kidnapped to some random place in America when I was supposed to be visiting you in Florida-"

"The Florida Keys are in Florida, though?"

"You know what I mean! Oh, and I just found out that you lied to people and said we were dating just to get a free vacation."

"It worked, though," Dream says and George looks at him, his eyes digging into the side of his head. "Okay, look, I know it's weird, but George! You can't tell me this isn't kinda cool at the same time."

"It would be cooler if we went as friends and everyone else knew that."

"We are going as- George, we aren't actually dating! It's fake. Think of it....think of it as a bit, okay? A joke. A meme. We're memeing these people to get free access to a private beach and an all you can eat buffet."

When George doesn't respond, Dream turns his head quickly to read his expression. George was thinking hard about it. So hard, Dream can hear the gears turn in his head and click into place as he says, "A meme?"

"Yes," Dream's hands tighten on the wheel, "a meme."

"We still aren't kissing for them or anything, right?"

"No! Oh my God, George, we aren't kissing, so relax, alright? No kissing, no hugging, no bed-sharing, no touching below the waist, no drink sharing, no cuddling. I got it." George leans back in the passenger seat and shakes his head slightly. "No way you're actually getting upset over going to the Keys."

"I'm not! It's just...weird."

"You think I wanna do this?"

"Yes!" George cries. "You're the one who got us into this whole mess."

"And yet, you agreed."

"Only for the room service."

"Oh, that's the thing that sold you?" Dream teases.

"Yeah. That and the promise that you're paying for my McDonald's for the next five months," George says.

"I never agreed to that?"

"Whoops, sorry. I forgot to check in with your first. Eh, I guess it doesn't matter, though, because I was just gonna force you to pay anyways," George quips, mocking Dream's voice. "Oh, I'm Dream! I just force people to be my boyfriend so I can go to some fancy resort."

"It was a good deal!" Dream exclaims and George starts to laugh, rocking forward in his seat with his eyes scrunched up. The wind swallowed any breathy laughs from George, so it looked like his friend was just making a weird face, which made Dream start laughing.

"You're such an idiot!"

"Stop! I'm gonna crash, stop!" Dream pleads. He couldn't even look in George's direction because of the face he was making, but laughter bubbles up, and he tries to block out George's grinning face with his hand. "Stop! I'm serious! I'm not looking at you."

"Look at me, Dream."

"No!"

"Oh, Dream!" George says and he leans forward more until Dream can see him in the corner of his eye. He was still making that stupid face. Dream tries so hard not to laugh. He tries to bite his cheek and smother a smile, but he loses terribly, a loud wheeze exploding from him, and he has to take his foot off the gas to make sure he doesn't accidentally floor it.

"I hate you. Stop!" He giggles. George, satisfied with the reaction, stops and goes back to looking at the Atlantic ocean around them. The air between them feels more comfortable and it smells like summer.

"What's this place called again?" George asks as the Keys become a bit more visible in the distance.

"Key Largo?"

"No, the resort."

"Oh. Moonlight Resort," Dream reminds him. "It's nice. I've seen pictures when my parents were obsessed with this place."

"Did they ever go?"

"No."

George snorts. "They must hate you for being able to go then."

"What they don't know can't hurt them," Dream says. George gives him a surprised look and he shrugs. "What? I don't tell them everything."

"Interesting... Can we make another rule? I just thought of it."

"Hit me."

"No telling anyone about this or what happens."

It was Dream's turn to give him a weird look. "What's gonna happen?"

"Like during interviews. What we have to say to each other, you know?"

"Well, Sapnap just knows that we're in the Keys. I didn't tell him why and yeah, for sure. I don't think anyone should know about...the interviews and stuff..." Dream trails off. *Hang on.* He didn't think this through. The resort's ad-project thing with them was supposed to be a magazine page with little snippets of their feedback and then their photos, so people would see them regardless.

But George...

Dream presses his lips together. Dream was pretty sure George thought they were going to take pictures for the resort's Instagram or something. It was going to be way more. Way bigger. Dream didn't have to worry too much because no one's seen his face, but they've definitely seen George's. He's seen the Twitter edits of him.

"So, what *can* we do?" Dream asks.

"I would prefer it if we didn't do anything."

"Well, I mean, we can't just not, you know?"

"You have such a way with words, Dream," George says as he scrolls lazily through his phone.

"Whatever, you know what I'm saying. I don't know. I think hand holding is fine and so is fake flirting."

"Fake flirting?"

"You know, like...ugh, you know what I'm talking about."

"No, no, I don't," George says. *The little shit, I can hear your smile.* "Enlighten me."

"I'll do it when you're least expecting it," Dream answers. A shadow of a seagull passes above them as Key Largo grows bigger.

"Just gotta warn you- I'm tough to crack." God, George was so full of himself and Dream raises his eyebrows.

"Well...I doubt that."

"Try me."

"No, no. I'll get you."

George laughs. "You suck at flirting! Do I need to remind you what happened last month with Snapchat Girl?"

Dream makes a pained noise and grabs a fistful of his hair, propping one elbow up against his window. "No," he cringes.

"Exactly. I won't break."

"Okay, George," Dream sighs and then he says, "I say we throw pet names in there too."

"No. No way. I am not calling you baby, or sweetheart, or love-"

"Fine, you don't have to, but I will. You know we have to really convince them because if we don't-"

"-We'll be stuck in the Keys and paying tons of money. Trust me, I know. But relationships aren't that obvious."

"What do you know about relationships, George?" Dream laughs, but George's mouth slowly closes, eyes narrowing slightly. Dream knew it was a low blow to make fun of the fact that his

friend barely had a serious relationship, but there were already way too many rules down, in his opinion. Their fake relationship was about to be as tacky and stale as George's actual one.

George ends up not responding and he turns up the radio in the car to drown out their silence, which was fine. Dream didn't care. George got over it and went back to playing around with his phone as they finally cruise past the Key Largo welcome sign, the car wheels touching actual ground, and Dream relaxes a bit more. Driving on bridges always made him tense.

But this?

Dream's eyes take in the green and blue all around him, feeling the hot sun beat down on his skin, and he breathes in the hot air.

This was worth it.

George ended up having to pull Google Maps up on his phone and guide Dream down Key Largo for an ungodly amount of time. George kept stumbling over directions and blaming it on the glare on his phone while Dream kept pulling over and memorizing the next turn and street for them to find this place. All because George couldn't guide for shit.

But finally, after a whole day of traveling and a sore neck from sleeping on the plane, a large white building sticks out like a sore thumb. A beautiful, clean, tropical sore thumb.

George lifts his white sunglasses from his eyes. He found them while looking through the glove compartment for a map and took one look at them before saying, 'Finders, Keepers.' Dream thought they looked ridiculous, but leave it to George to forget his sunglasses back at Dream's house. As the heavenly gates of the resort creep into view, Dream looks over and sees a tired smile spread on George's face, and Dream knew that he was equally as relieved to finally be there.

"You think that's it?" George asks.

Dream takes one look at the blue neon sign with fancy writing that read *Moonlight Resort*.

"No," he deadpans.

"Shut up, Dream."

"Wha- no! You shut up! That was a dumb question!"

"Well, I didn't know! I've never even heard of this place and you didn't show any pictures."

"I was driving for, like, four hours! You could've looked it up!"

"Hey, I'm already doing more than enough here. The least you can do is-" Dream pulls into the large golden arch, hitting the speed bump hard on purpose so that George goes shooting forward. "Really, Dream?!" He cries. He tugs at the locked seatbelt across his chest.

Dream doesn't say anything, but his smile gives it away.

George grumbles something and Dream pretends he didn't hear it as he pays the parking fee (amazing that they had to pay for parking despite it being a 'full ride') and pulls into a spot all the way at the top. Dream didn't like it since when he got out, he could see how high up they were. But his excitement to get out of the car tramples his anxiety down as he throws open his door, practically tripping on his own feet, and he looks out to the late afternoon sun. It was still muggy and hot out, but the view overlooking the dazzling waves cooled Dream down to his core. He loved



the ocean.

He leans against the trunk of the car and grins.

"George-" Dream says as his friend stands next to him. "Welcome to Key Largo."

"It's hot."

Dream's beautiful view is skewed and he looks at George. "What?"

"It's hot. Can we go inside? I'm tired."

"George- we are in Key fucking Largo and we have *this* view," he gestures to the ocean, "and you're complaining it's hot?"

"...Yeah?"

The two stare at each other before George sighs. "Okay, yes, the view is beautiful and I'm excited to see it *tomorrow*. Right now, I'm tired, and I'm sweating, and I just want to get this over with."

"Do you have something against the ocean or what?"

"I...I'm not a big fan of the water," George admits and he shoves Dream off of the trunk. "Help me with your suitcase."

"Well, by the end of this trip, you're gonna love it."

"Nope."

"Yep."

"No."

"Yes, you are," Dream says.

"Dream, you can't just force me to like the ocean-"

"Pretty sure I can."

"No, you can't! It smells and the sand gets in your eyes..."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?! Sand getting in your eyes is a part of the beach experience!"

"I don't care! It hurts."

The bickering doesn't stop. Even when they get in the elevator to go back to the ground floor, Dream was shooting out all the reasons why George should like the water while his friend found counter-arguments for everything he said. George looked tired of Dream already. Yet, Dream felt nothing but a buzz in his body as they walked to the resort entrance, and when Dream says it was extra- he means something straight out of *Mama Mia*.

A large, fenced overhang loomed over the resort's glass doors and a mixture of vines and tropical flowers are woven through the holes like garland during Christmas. Blue flower petals from above flutter down to the ground around their feet. It was stunning, to put it lightly. Dream had no issue becoming fixated on the small details around them. The tall palms leading up to the entrance,

dracaena, and other shrubs flourished in an emerald green against the building's white exterior- even the fucking *pavement* beneath them had shells in it.

"This is way too nice," George mumbles, brown eyes gazing up to the vines above them.

"No kidding," Dream breathes out. He sneaks a glance at a mildly impressed George, his skin already a pink from the intense Florida sun. *Note to self: Grab George some sunscreen.* He did not need his friend getting skin cancer on this trip.

Dream stands next to him and they look up at a towering building with rounded balconies jutting out from every window. Seriously, it was just like *Mama Mia*. His sister would love this.

"Dream?" George says suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"Promise me," George says, holding out his slender pinky to Dream with his eyes still gazing up to the sun, "that you won't actually fall in love."

Dream hesitates as he looks down at the pinky in front of him. One week with George is far from enough time to develop that kind of feeling, right? But still, he hooked his own pinky around George's cautiously, wondering why George even thought that in the first place.

"Trust me, I promise," he responds. George turns to look at him with a slow smile spreading on his face as the salty wind blows around them, seaspray kissing their faces. Dream grins back at him, but he couldn't help but feel like he just made a horrible, terrible mistake.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

*I don't know.* "We're waiting for you to hurry up and get inside because you're the one that wanted to go in. Now, *go!*" Dream says, giving George a shove to ease the sudden weirdness between them. *Way to go, George. Way to remind us what we needed to do here.*

The inside was even more stunning, with three large mermaids spitting arches of water into a grand, million-dollar fountain. Dream quickly learned that this place loved to fill empty spaces with lush plants because he and George had to whack at leaves while waiting in line to check-in.

"I can see myself in the floor," George points out. Dream looks down and they stare at each other in the reflection, matching smiles. It's the simple things in life, you know?

"Holy shit..." Dream whispers.

"Oh my God," George giggles, suddenly looking up and he hits Dream's arm until he follows his excited point to the ceiling. "Dream- look!"

"Oh my- *what?!?*" The ceiling was made from broken mirrors. Their faces were distorted and as George moved his body around, it cut his figure up into weird, broken pieces.

"Look! Look, Dream-"

"I'm looking!"

George dips back a bit and stuck out his arm so it looked broken, lining it up with his ear so it was like some horrid horn on the side of his head. Dream barks out a laugh and quickly covers it with a cough as a snobby family in front of them turns around to shoot a glare. He laughs through his

fingers, though, as George continues to twist his body around.

"You're having fun with this, aren't you?"

George smiles. "Yup."

"Wait, wait, wait-" Dream says and he pulls out his phone. "Let's take a picture. Stand up normal."

They crane their necks to the ceiling and Dream holds his phone right above his face as George does peace signs into two glass shards next to him. Needless to say, it looked fucking hilarious.

"Twitter's gonna love that," George says. Dream opens his mouth to say that it wasn't for Twitter, it was for them, but a loud voice cuts him off.

"Well, I'll be!" A woman with a heavy southern accent comes from behind the counter in a tight navy dress. "Y'all must be Clay and George!"

George gives him a look, expecting him to do the talking. Dream shrugs. He had no idea who she was either, so what was he supposed to say?

"Oh, relax, sweetheart!" She says, walking to George. "I'm not scary! I'm just here to check y'all into your rooms- nice and comfy. Y'know, makin' sure y'all are settled for your stay, so we can start documenting!"

"Right," Dream says. George was staring at the shiny floor, refusing to look at the people staring at them and the loud woman. "I'm sorry... what's your name?"

She looks at them before her face drops slightly. "Well, I apologize! My name is Isla and I was the person who saw y'all's videos and had my manager contact you. I recognized you from the photos you sent!"

George's head snaps up to look at Dream, who winced slightly. "Yep, that would be..." he quickly glances at George, who looked beyond confused. "That would be us."

"No worries, babies! I'll take care of ya if you'll please step to the counter all the way down there!" She scurries back behind the long line of counters and gathers papers.

"You *sent* photos of me?!" George whisper shouts once they start to walk down to the counter.

"They needed headshots and ID verification, so I may have sent them one or two..." Dream admits. God, his face was on fire.

"Idiot."

"Now, the contract says a week, correct?" Isla says suddenly, appearing in front of them. Her dark hair was twisted into a long braid over her shoulder as the computer keyboard clicks loudly.

"Yeah," George answers without an ounce of excitement.

She looks at him up and down. "I'm assumin' y'all want the whole package?"

"Yes ma'am," Dream responds.

"Do you happen to have a room with two beds?" George asks. Isla's typing comes to a slow stop as she tilts her head at him.

"I apologize?"

"Just ignore him! He's tired. You know- jet lag and all that...British jazz," Dream says. Isla nods at him and gives George a look again before going back to typing. Dream shoots him a glare, but George was on the warpath right now.

"Dream, I thought you said you wanted two beds? Because of your bed wet-"

"No! No, George, I never said that!"

"Do y'all need to figure things out? We do have a few two-bedded suites, but those are for families. In the contract, it says y'all are signed up for a one-bedded suite for one week, complete with all the Moonlight Resorts passes," Isla offers. Dream kicks at George's ankle from behind the counter as he smiles at her.

"We're good. We're taking the suite that's in the contract."

"Is it possible to get extra blankets and pillows then?" George says and Dream never ever wanted to hit someone so badly.

The rest of the check-in was torture as Dream had to keep saving their asses as George asked very out of place questions at a *couple's resort*, one of Dream's favorites being: If we break up, does the contract end? The answer was a solid yes.

Because they wanted genuine happy couples in their ad.

And Dream and George were anything but.

Thank God Isla didn't question anything further as she led them through the hotel, babbling about the ocean-inspired decor (shocker) while George stayed a good six feet behind Dream (another shocker). By the time they reached their room, Isla and Dream were waiting while George slowly walked over and took his time to look at all the paintings on the walls.

"He really likes interior design," Dream lies through his teeth, knowing damn well George didn't care. He was doing this to be annoying. To test Dream's patience.

Isla nods politely. "Yes. All of our guests have liked it."

"Hey, George?" Dream calls. "You coming?"

George waves his hand dismissively and Isla starts to unlock their door when George gets close enough. Behind Isla's back Dream flips him off and George grinned.

The room floored Dream.

It was small with the fluffiest white bed in the center on the wall, facing a large TV, and the wooden headrest had all sorts of buttons, plugs, and lights in it. Airy curtains flutter around the glass doors that showed a blue ocean and white sand, the metal railing rusting from the coastal weather. Off to Dream's right was a small bathroom, a pale blue gentle on the eyes, and a glass shower with sand-colored tiles creeping up the wall. George throws his backpack on the armchair by the door and Isla's smile strains slightly. Okay, maybe they couldn't pull it off...but Dream would be damned if he didn't go down trying.

He reaches blindly behind him and grabs George's hand. He feels his friend stiffen, pulling away slightly, and Dream tightens his grip, forcing his smile to stay. Things must've clicked for George

because he relaxed and turned his hand to lock their fingers together, shuffling forward a bit so they were standing side by side. Isla nods and turns to the balcony, and Dream lets go.

"Most guests love the seaside view, so we made sure to give you guys the most central room in the resort so y'all can't see anything but the ocean blue!" She sighs like it's the best thing ever. George makes a weak impressed noise and Dream snorts at him.

"Thank you, Isla," Dream says.

She turns, a wicked grin on her face. "Do you boys know why we call ourselves the Moonlight Resort?"

"No." Ah. George has spoken up. *Way to add to the conversation, George*, Dream thought dryly.

"Because in this spot, you have the best view of the moon and stars in Key Largo! It's perfect for those romantic date nights and walks on the beach!"

"That's...cool!" Dream says.

"And, since we are known for primarily being a couple's resort, as you know," Isla points out so helpfully and Dream's face flushes slightly, "the moon gives the perfect amount of light for those long nights! Creates the most beautiful atmosphere to make sweet love."

That did it.

A silence fell in the room as Isla looked at them expectantly like they were supposed to agree or something. Dream looks at George who's jaw dropped slightly and his ears were bright red. They look at each other, then at Isla, then George looks back at him, and Dream nods slowly, trying to send George the message to just agree.

"Oh, yeah!" Dream chuckles awkwardly.

"Those...love...nights...for sure!" George adds painfully.

Isla guffaws at them and shakes her head, her smile never leaving. "I'll leave you boys to it! I reckon y'all must be exhausted from your travels."

"You have no idea," Dream mumbles and he drags his suitcase further into the room.

"Room service's log is under the remote and feel free to ask for me if you boys have any questions about the contract or the resort," she says. Then, acting like she didn't just put them in the worst situation ever, she spins on her heel and leaves them. George groans loudly and covers his face.

"What...did you get us into?" George says. Dream doesn't look away from the door, but he shrugs.

"I have no idea."

## **8 p.m**

"You are *red*, George."

"Shut up! I know!"

George swats at Dream's finger as he goes to poke his friend's sunburnt cheek. They were sitting

(more like slowly sinking) on the bed with a room take-out box between them, the bright day replaced by the yellow glow of the bedside lamp. The bed was just as bouncy and plush as Dream thought it would be and a part of him was genuinely excited to go to sleep tonight.

“Can we talk about how bad of a liar you are?” George says, turning off the TV. Dream tears off a piece of his garlic bread and rolls his eyes.

“It was better than what you were doing.”

“I wasn’t milking our relationship. Couples don’t hold hands constantly and walk next to each other.”

“Well, they also don’t ask for their own bed and walk, like, twenty feet behind their boyfriend. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

George scoffs, but Dream knows he made a point because he changes the topic. “What about Isla?”

“Wha ‘bout her?” Dream says through a mouthful of bread.

“She’s weird.”

“I like her. She’s funny.”

“She implied that we were gonna...like-”

“Fuck?”

George’s sunburnt face turned redder. “Yeah, that.”

“Well, don’t worry. We’re not.”

“So comforting, Dream.”

“What? What do you want me to say? Yes?”

“No!” George exclaims and Dream laughs. He was so easy to rile up. “Oh my God, Dream, no. We’re adding that to the top of the list and it’s going right above no kissing.”

“Look, if it makes you feel better...”

“...What?”

Dream smirks. “I dunno, I thought you would have something.”

“You’re an idiot. Just for that, I’m calling dibs on showering first.”

George slides off the high bed and grabs clothes before disappearing to the bathroom. Dream listens and laughs when he hears a small *click* of the lock.

As the shower runs he cleans up by wiping the crumbs off of the bed and heading to the balcony, leaning on his elbows as he takes a deep breath of the warm air. The ocean hisses beneath him and he can see the floating pier on the water, lit up with fire torches, and people chattering and laughing with drinks in their hands. He can see the shadows of couples running on the beach and scooping each other up in their arms. Dream could already tell that this resort never slept. The resort was alive with people having fun and it felt like Dream and George were the only people considering sleeping tonight. People were on the beach, sitting around beach fire pits in the dunes and leaned

against each other. Isla was right about their room though- he saw nothing but an inky ocean and stars above him, the smoke of the fires dulling their sparkle slightly.

Dream smiles a bit before it falls just as quickly. A part of him wished he was here with someone. George was great and all and he would make this fun, but Dream still felt a disappointed pang in his gut. Dream would've loved to love here.

"Hey-" George says softly behind him. Dream glances over his shoulder, watching a water droplet run down George's neck, bleeding dark on his hoodie. "You good? You look like you were thinking about life or something."

"Yeah, I'm good. Just checking out the beach," Dream responds. He moves over slightly as George steps out, rubbing his soaked hair with his towel. He smelled like hotel soap. "That was a fast shower."

George shrugs. "I could only find the bar of soap."

"They should have shampoo and stuff under the sink-- wait, bar of soap? George, did you wash your hair with the body soap?"

"...No."

"Oh my God, you did! That's disgusting! No way you actually-!"

"Only because I didn't know where the shampoo was! Stop laughing at me!" George says and Dream laughs in bewilderment, a loud wheeze coming from him. George was annoyed at first, but it didn't take long for him to start laughing too.

"You're so stupid! You didn't think to check under the sink?!"

"I'm...colorblind. I don't know! I just want to sleep!"

"You're colorblind- HA! George, that doesn't make sense!"

"Whatever. Your turn to shower. You smell."

"At least I won't use the bar of soap to wash my hair."

"Shut up!"

George shoves him back inside and Dream was still laughing to himself as he grabs his things, making sure to make a point of pulling out the shampoo bottle and placing it on the counter with a loud noise. He hears George say something to him, but he didn't respond. Instead, he chuckles and turns the water on, wiping the steam from George's shower from the mirror.

And holy hell- he looked awful.

He had eyebags and his blonde hair was messed up. His face felt greasy from traveling all day and he probably smells rancid from the amount of sweating he did. He was glad to tug off his t-shirt and wash off the grit from his skin and hair.

Once he tugs on his pajama bottoms, he walks out with a toothbrush in his mouth and his dirty clothes in his arms, dumping them in his empty suitcase.

"Don't you have clothes in there?" George comments from the bed, sprawled out in the dead center with his phone close to his face.

"I put my shit away hours ago. You still have to do that," Dream says.

"Awo- mi-away- ew, ah, oo, aa," George mimics him. *Oh, right.* Dream moves his toothbrush and repeats what he says and George glances over at him. "I'll do it tomorrow. Why are you not wearing a shirt?"

Dream looks down, confused. He never wore a shirt to bed because he always felt trapped when he did. Apparently, this was not normal for George. "It's how I sleep."

He sees George's eyes flick up and down before making a face and turning back to his phone. "Whatever."

"Weirdo," he comments back.

By the time he finds a place to plug his phone in and George makes sure their doors are locked, the bright LED clock blinked 9:30 at them. As soon as Dream buried his face into the pillow, breathing in the scent of laundry detergent and ocean, the fan blowing a gentle breeze on his back, he was pretty much asleep. The only thing that kept him up was his friend grabbing pillows and the throw blanket.

"What are you doin', man?" Dream murmurs into the pillow.

"No sharing a bed, remember?"

"Just come on. Don't sleep on the floor, George. That's gross." Dream felt bad for making George take the floor.

"I'll be fine, I'm on the carpet and-"

"Okay, well, I don't want you on the floor. Just come up here, it's fine, I don't care. I shared a bed with my sister when we went to Disney World. I'm not a blanket hog," Dream says, sitting up slightly. "We can put a pillow between us if you're that uncomfortable."

"I'm good," George insists and Dream watches in the dark as George settles down on the pillow, holding an extra one in his arms. The blue blanket was draped over his hips and a wave of guilt hit Dream. Even after all that traveling and planning Dream put him through, he still held onto the short stick when he didn't have to and it seemed unfair.

"Are you sure?" He asks.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Now go to bed, they're gonna make us do stuff tomorrow."

"...Okay, George." Dream lays back down and stretches his legs across the bed, feeling like he was sleeping on a cloud. Even then, on the verge of sleep, he manages to whisper, "Goodnight."

"Night."

A small part of him hoped that George would come up here with him. The room was getting cold.



Chapter Notes

we got a long one boys o7  
enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

**June 13**

**10 a.m**

“How was the floor last night?”

George shrugs, taking a loud bite of his apple, before saying, “It was fine.”

The conversation was dry since George didn’t want to admit that sleeping on the hotel floor was a bad idea, but Dream could see how uncomfortable his friend was sitting with eyebags darker than they were yesterday.

“You sure?” Dream asks, raising an eyebrow. “You look kinda rough, George.”

“Thanks, Dream, but I’m good,” George responds. Dream shakes his head as George tries, and fails, to stifle a yawn.

“Well, I slept great. The bed is made of feathers and clouds or something,” Dream says.

“That’s great.”

“You could’ve joined me,” Dream offers before rushing to add, “there’s a million pillows, so we could make a wall-”

“I’m not sleeping in the same bed as you.”

“Hey,” Dream jabs his spoon in George’s direction, “all I’m saying is that you don’t have to sleep on the floor. I won’t say anything.”

George rolls his eyes at him, but he sighs. “Whatever. Do you have any rubbish to throw out?”

“Ooh, ‘rubbish.’ You want some tea with your crumpets too, your majesty?” Dream teases. George stares at him, unamused with Dream’s joke, which made Dream laugh awkwardly and he slides George his empty cereal bowl across the small table they sat at. George doesn’t pick it up. “Oh, come on, it was a joke, George!”

George stands and gathers his trash, ignoring Dream’s in front of him. “I don’t care! You made fun of me.”

“I made fun of your *accent*.”

“Same thing! You can take your own *trash*, Dream,” George snaps, making sure to mock Dream’s

voice on the correction. Dream groans and looks up at the glass ceiling of the resort dining hall, staring boredly up at the blue sky. It was way too early for this.

Except it wasn't early at all. The resort stopped serving breakfast in thirty minutes, but that didn't stop couples from rolling in like herds of sheep. Dream liked to play the guessing game of who's been here for a while and who's just arrived because it was so painfully obvious to him. Mainly because he and George had the same reaction as the other new arrivals- all of them gawking up at the glass dome ceiling with a large spinning moon hanging in the center over a large fountain. Ivy and vines fell down in curtains of green over the golden walls of the dining hall and in the very back, in complete contrast to the fanciness of the rest of the interior, the food line looked like a high school cafeteria. It was underwhelming, but whatever. He got his cereal and George got his bagel.

"Dream, come on, pick up your stuff," George urges.

"No. You offered, so you should take it."

"I'm not taking your nasty bowl after you made fun of me, that's not--"

"Please?" Dream lifts his head and they stare each other down. George wasn't budging, though, and his friend crossed his arms and stared down at him in a deadpan. "You're serious?"

"Yes! You can walk the ten feet and put it in the bin."

Dream groans again and looks at where the dish drop off counter was. "I don't wanna."

"Wow, we've been at this resort for..." George checks the large clock on the wall behind him, "not even 24-hours, and you're already too good to put your dishes away."

"I'm not 'too good!' I mean, to be fair, you offered to take my things and you should--"

"Oh my God! Fine! Fine, I'll take your stupid bowl if it means you'll stop whining," George says as he picks up Dream's stuff.

Dream grins. "It's not whining if I'm right!" He calls to George's back as he walks away and George turns around to shoot him a glare.

*He's being weird*, Dream thought as his eyes follow George across the room. He watches as George almost runs into a couple and although it was funny, Dream didn't laugh. *George is weirder than normal*.

And that's saying something considering the fact that his friend didn't see anything wrong with using body soap as shampoo. But this morning, when Dream woke up, he saw George out on the balcony and he didn't look right. He looked tired. *Distant*, the word popped into Dream's mind. He was snappier than usual and kept a good foot of space between them at all times.

*Or maybe he's just being George? I mean, I barely see him, so maybe this is how he acts in person? He was joking around with me before*, Dream reasons to himself. George seemed fine now. A bit tense, but that was for obvious reasons since they had to keep an eye out for Isla. Dream's lips pull up into a slight smile as George starts to walk back to him, rolling his eyes at a slow walking couple in front of him. *Yeah...yeah, he's fine*.

"I see y'all found the dining hall!" Isla cries behind him and Dream jumps in his seat, hand gripping his shirt as he whips around to look at her. "Oh! I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't mean to scare ya."

“It’s fine-”

“See, I was stopping by,” Isla interrupts, pulling over a chair to take a seat next to Dream, “because I saw you and George here and I have a little gift to give y’all.”

“You do?”

“I do! Was just on my way up to your room, actually. But I’ll wait until your sweetheart comes back,” Isla says. Dream pretends to look for George in the crowd just to hide his small wince at the nickname. When he does see George, he makes sure to give him a pointed look towards Isla next to him.

“George! Good to see ya, how’d you sleep last night?” Isla asks once he’s within earshot distance.

“Um...” A quick look at Dream. “Good, I guess.”

“Great! Because I managed to snag you boys some of these!” She pulls out two tickets and slams them down on the counter. Dream raises an eyebrow, exchanging an amused look with George.

“Mini-golfing?” Dream says.

“Today’s supposed to be beautiful! There’s already a nice ocean breeze goin’ on and the sun isn’t brutal today,” Isla comments.

George picks up the mini-golf pass. “I didn’t see any places on the drive down, though?”

“Don’t you worry! Moonlight Resort has its own golf course. It’s tiny, but the fun levels are still high.”

*Fun levels..?* The last time he went mini-golfing, he ended up having to fish his sister’s ball out of the gross pond because he accidentally hit hers in there. So the word ‘fun’ didn’t come to mind when he heard mini-golfing.

“Y’all don’t seem excited,” Isla says, her shoulders sagging a bit. “I can find you guys a different activity for the day if you’re still tired from traveling! It’s not any trouble-”

“It’s fine,” George speaks up, “I mean, my Dreamie here loves mini-golfing.”

Dream’s neck snaps to George, who didn’t even look at him, and a hot blush creeps up on his neck at the nickname. There’s a beat of silence and Dream realizes they were waiting for him to respond.

“For sure! Almost as much as I love George...” he says through a tight smile. He can see George bite back a laugh at how pained he sounded when he said the words, but Isla didn’t seem to notice.

“Aw! Well, aren’t y’all just the cutest! I’ll leave these with you, just come check out at the front desk when y’all are ready to leave, alrighty?”

Then as fast as she appeared, Isla leaves and swings her chair back to the table she pulled it from with a grace Dream has never seen someone do. Isla was a force to be reckoned with and he had a bad feeling that if they got caught lying, she would be the first person to personally throw them out on the curb.

Dream turns to George. “Seriously? *Dreamie?* ”

“What’s wrong with it?” George laughs.

“I thought you were against pet names!”

“I’m against *you* and if I have to play along with this stupid thing, I’m making you pay for it,” George scoffs and they start to walk back to their room.

“Please, a nickname is barely anything.”

“Then why’d you bring it up?” George says as they step into the elevator. Dream leans against the gold railing and looks at his messy reflection in the mirror covering the walls around them.

Dream sighs. “I dunno. I wasn’t expecting it, I guess.”

“...You liked it.”

“I didn’t.”

“You totally did! Oh my God-” George starts laughing and Dream swats at his arm before shoving George out of the elevator when the doors open.

“Shut up! No, I didn’t. It’s weird and it sounds like something someone would name their cat.”

“What cat?”

Dream lets out a long sigh as George keeps asking him what cat he was talking about, knowing that he was getting under Dream’s skin, and for a second, Dream wondered if the Florida Keys were worth fake dating George.

“You know I hate mini-golf, right?” Dream says to George, turning his back as they change out of their pajamas.

“Duh, that’s why I agreed to do it.”

“You suck, George.”

“You didn’t say that back in the dining hall,” George quips and Dream looks over his shoulder as he tugs on a t-shirt. George was already dressed and had Dream’s sunglasses sitting on top of his brown hair, an amused smirk on his face. *Sunglass thief- wear your own pair, idiot!*

“That was for Isla and you know it.”

“Do I know that, Dreamie? You don’t love me, do you?” George mocks in a distraught tone. Dream shakes his head and places a white bucket hat on top of his blonde hair.

“Not in a million years, *Georgie*. Now get up,” he orders, “we have a date.”

### **11:45 a.m**

The golf course ended up being a ten minute golf cart ride from the hotel and it was the worst ten minutes of Dream’s life. Isla found them right before they left and insisted that she should join them on the way there since she had to come anyways, so Dream and George were stuck sitting on the back of the golf cart. Even though their backs were to Isla, she was twisting around to ramble about the resort and how many couples loved it here. Dream would bet his Youtube channel that she knew every single review someone left about the Moonlight Resort.

However, since they were under Isla's watchful gaze, this makes Dream awkwardly place a hand over George's on the padded seat of the cart. Dream's hand was sweaty and he saw George grimace, looking like he was ready to throw himself off the cart.

"Now, I'm sure you boys love the camera, right? Considering the fact you do all that Youtube stuff," Isla asks as the golf cart pulls into a mini tropical jungle, the shadows of trees and palms sheltering them from the sun.

"Dreamie *loves* the camera," George says. Dream pretends to look up at the sky to hide his dramatic eye roll.

"Great! Because we were hoping to kinda follow y'all around the course! Get some pictures of you-"

"Pictures?" Dream says, scrunching his eyebrows. "What? For the ad, right?"

"Obviously, Dream. That's why we're here in the first place," George responds. Dream pinches the back of George's hand to shut him up because Isla tilted her head at them, looking a bit confused on why the 'happy couple' seemed so reluctant to take pictures together.

"Y'all won't even notice us!" Isla assures, shaking off the weird answers. "We'll be far away so y'all can do what you need to do!"

They followed Isla to the small wooden hut where clubs and colorful golf balls sat on a stone table. There was a mini-bar with a few couples chatting and soft Hawaiian music played in the speakers.

"I'll be right back y'all. I gotta go find Mr. Mark somewhere around here to tell him you're here," Isla says and when she leaves, George wastes no time pulling up his sunglasses to glare at Dream.

"George-" Dream starts to say. He knew exactly what his friend was going to say.

"I am *not* doing those poses!" George whispers in a harsh voice. Dream gives him a weird look.

"I know that," Dream whispers back and he looks around. "Look, we'll hold hands like we agreed and then every once and a while we'll stand close, alright?"

"Why are we even here?"

Dream shoves a golf club into George's chest. "Because you agreed to come here, idiot. Now grab a ball and suck it up, George."

George mumbles something and grabs a blue golf ball as Dream grabs a green one. Their knuckles brush against each other, one of the most natural hand touches they've done so far, and Dream notes how George pulled his hand quickly, cheeks a light pink. Dream gazes up at him, pretending to look at the other balls in the bin.

*And he's back to being tense again. What is his issue?* Dream wondered. George was a lot of things, and being hard to read was definitely one of them. Dream was used to wearing his emotions on his sleeve since he grew up in a family that taught him to always talk and express what they feel, but George? His friend was the exact opposite. In fact, George rarely talked about his family other than a passing mention of his mom or sister in a story. Dream knew this fake dating thing bothered him, but his question was how much? *Am I treading on something? Was I pushing it too far with the standing close thing? I don't know. I never know with him.*

"Hey, we can pretend I'm sick or something," Dream says suddenly. George stops his mindlessly

pacing around the hut and Dream sees how uncomfortable he looked with other people being there. His friends' brown eyes kept darting from the couples to Dream.

"No...no, it's fine," George responds.

"Well, you don't sound fine."

George moves to stand next to him and he lowers his voice. "Maybe because we're expected to be like *that*."

Dream follows the pointed word to the couple leaning against each other at the bar, laughing quietly to themselves as the guy presses a kiss to the woman's forehead. Dream feels that familiar longing in his chest, but he shrugs.

"It's fine. We'll just say PDA makes us uncomfortable or something," Dream says. George sighs, but doesn't say anything, and that's when Isla comes storming into the hut with an older man with a beard behind her. Her dark hair was twisted up in a bun and her neck was wet with sweat.

"I found him y'all! The little bugger was hiding from me!" She cries. "Anyway, this is Mr. Mark! The photographer for today. He's great with long distance shots and staying out of your way, so you should forget he's even here."

The three of them look at Mr. Mark and Dream felt kind of bad for the guy. He looked tired of Isla. Yet, Mr. Mark gave him and George a smile and a nod when George gave a small wave. Dream closes his eyes for a second, already feeling the long afternoon they have in front of them.

Isla checks them in at the counter and leads them to the first hole on a sandy path. The day was beautiful and it reminded Dream of springtime with the smell of sweet flowers and salt mixing in the wind. George's pink cheeks were turning red under the intense summer sun.

"Sunscreen," Dream realizes quietly. He was supposed to grab some for George, but he completely forgot about it until now.

"What?" George asks.

"Nothing. You're getting...you know-" Dream pokes a finger to George's cheek and his friend slaps his finger away.

"Alrighty! Hole one is here, boys!" Isla sings. The golf course stretched around them with colorful flags at each hole, a turquoise river weaving through it with wooden bridges arching above the water. Dream can see the ocean just over the horizon of the course. He sneaks a look at George and he's surprised to see George already looking at him, brown eyes darting around his face.

"-play, Dream?" Isla says to him. Dream looks away from George.

"What?" He says dumbly.

"Are you ready to play, Dream?" She repeats.

Another glance to George. "Of course."

"George?" She says to his friend.

"Mhm," George responds absentmindedly. *Try not to sound too excited.*

"Then let me get out of your hair! Remember, Mr. Mark is around, don't lose any golf balls, and

*really* try to milk this, alright? For me?” Isla says and that was the first time Dream heard her sound desperate for them to do something other than stand next to each other. Dream gives her a smile, feeling bad for lying to her.

“We’ll milk it like a cow,” Dream says. That seemed to be the right answer because her smile brightens as she takes her leave, walking quickly to where the hut was..

“*Like a cow?*” George says, raising a curious eyebrow.

“C’mon, she’s clearly excited about this. The least we can do is give her a hug shot or something,” Dream responds. He steps onto the course and nods to George’s ball in his friend’s hand. “You go first.”

“I’m not hugging you,” George drops his ball on the green felt of the course. Obstacle one was a small hill in front of the hole. “You’re all sweaty and gross.”

He hits the ball and blue goes soaring towards the hole, hitting the stone barrier around the course, and bouncing into the hole. Dream’s eyes widen as he watches, mildly impressed.

“That was cool,” Dream admits.

“Yeah, it was, wasn’t it?”

“You’re letting this get to your head aren’t you?”

“Hm, not yet. I wanna see what I’m up against first.”

See, as much as Dream hated mini-golf, he was good. All those summer afternoons spent at mini-golf places with his family trained him for this, and it was like muscle memory as he swung his club. His green ball rolls straight for the hole and lands with a satisfying *plop*.

“Of course you’re good,” George sighs.

“You also got a hole in one?”

“I’ll be honest,” George says as they move on to the next hole, “that was luck.”

Dream laughs and he nudges George with his shoulder. “I’ll go easy on you, don’t worry.”

“No! Don’t go easy- if we’re gonna be stalked and forced to play this stupid game, then we’re playing fair and square.”

“To be fair, this ‘stupid game’ was your doing,” Dream points out.

“Yeah, as a result of your *scheme* .”

“A scheme that you’re actively participating in.”

George stands on the brick border around the next course so he’s eye level with Dream. “Not like I had much of a choice, anyway. But, I have a deal for you, Dream.”

“What is it?” Dream responds carefully, trying to search for a hint of what his friend was planning. George lowers his sunglasses back over his eyes and smiles.

“If you win, I’ll drop one of the rules for one picture,” George starts. Dream narrows his eyes a bit because there were a lot of rules and George was very protective of them- so chances are his friend

was talking about a rule that had nothing to do with a picture, just to mess with Dream. To make him agree and play this little game, only to get nothing out of it.

“Which rule, George?” Dream asks. George tilts his head a bit in thought.

“Any rule you want, but the top three.” *Top three...what were they again? It was the big stuff, right?* Dream tried to remember, but George beat him to it. “No kissing, no touching below the waist, and no...you know. Sex.”

*Right. Right, right, right.* “Yeah, got it,” Dream says, ignoring the heat of embarrassment on his face. “What about you? If you win, what do you get?”

“If I win, every hole I beat you in is another month you have to pay for my McDonald’s.”

Dream’s face twists in confusion. “What?”

“So, if I win overall, every hole that I beat you in is one month,” George explains, leaning against his golf club. “But if you win overall, you get to do your little pose and break one of my rules.”

“*Our* rules,” Dream says. “I don’t want you hugging me either.”

George’s eyes look at him up and down. “Sure. That’s why you listed me as your boyfriend, right?”

“Sapnap wasn’t available. You’re a second choice,” Dream jokes and George laughs, shaking his head at him.

“I’m your side hoe?”

“Yup. You’re second in everything, *Georgie*. Second choice and now second place.”

George’s laughter falters a second, smile falling, but before Dream could react, George was fine. His smile returned and George carried on with the taunts with, “If you win, Dreamie .”

“You mean *when* I win.”

“We’ll see.”

As George hops down from the stones, Dream watches him carefully from under the brim of his bucket hat. *He’s so hard to read. Why did he- he knew I was joking, right? I mean, obviously he knows he’s not a second choice...*

Dream watches George swing at his ball, a blue streak bouncing against the bricks and missing the hole completely, but his friend grins and says something to Dream. *He knows I was joking.*

“I guess that first hole was dumb luck,” Dream says as he hits his own ball. It rolls smoothly over the wavy hills and settles a few inches away from the hole. “I’m definitely kicking your ass.”

“No! No, you won’t.”

**12:26 p.m**

Yes. Yes, he would.



Dream was ahead by a long shot with four hole-in-ones and keeping a steady rate of five swings per course when he missed. George, on the other hand, was struggling. And it was hilarious.

“Hit the ball, George,” Dream calls from the other side. He was standing down by the hole while his friend perched at the beginning, hesitantly lining up his club with the blue ball on the ground.

“You hit the ball, Dream!” George calls back, frustrated.

“My ball is already in the hole.”

“Shut up! Let me concentrate.”

Dream chuckles and swipes at a bead of sweat rolling down his temple. The day was getting hot and the breeze seemed to die down, plus the stress of Mr. Mark watching them from somewhere in the course was getting to him. They were almost done with the course and Dream knew for a fact Mr. Mark had gotten nothing from them. *Oh well.*

George swipes at the ball and groans as it darts over the hole, rolling straight back to where he was standing. “I’m done with this,” George says, sitting on the brick border.

“C’mon, George. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not!” George whines, pressing his forehead to his drawn up knees. “It’s hot and I wanna go take a nap.”

“Are you sure it’s not because you’re getting your ass handed to you?” Dream teases, walking over to him. He kicks George’s sneaker with his, trying to get him to stand up. There was a pair of couple’s not far behind them and Dream didn’t want to hold them up.

“Whatever. How much longer do we have to do this?”

Dream shrugs. “I dunno. Until we finish?”

“Ugh,” George scoffs.

“George.”

“What?”

“Get up. Come on.”

“I don’t want to. It’s cooler down here.”

“There’s people behind us, you can’t just-”

“I can.”

Dream stares down at George. His friend turns his head to peek up at Dream and once it became clear that George wasn’t going to finish pouting any time soon, Dream sighs and takes a seat next to George. *Huh, it is a bit cooler,* Dream realized and he believed it until he felt another droplet of sweat roll down his neck. *Nevermind.*

George makes a pained noise, but Dream ignores him. The ocean next to the course looked so refreshing and Dream could see seagulls coast above the blue water, riding on the imaginary wind. *Lucky birds.* Dream lifts his hand to block out the sun and George makes another grunt of pain, this time louder.

“What is your issue?” Dream asks.

“My face hurts,” George says and he lifts his sunglasses, turning to Dream. “Am I still red?”

“You’re a bit...pink...” Dream says slowly. Red was an understatement. George’s cheeks were the same shade as a cooked lobster and just looking at his friend made him wince in pain. However, there was a comical ring of pale skin around his eyes from where his sunglasses sat.

“Oh my God,” George groans. He moves to rub his squinting eyes but winces in pain as he accidentally rubs his burnt skin and Dream almost felt bad for wanting to laugh, but he did anyway. “What?” George asks, “What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing, nothing. We should’ve bought some sunscreen back at the hotel, huh?” Dream responds.

“No kidding.”

“I didn’t think you would get sunburnt on the first full day here.”

George gives him a miserable look and puts his sunglasses back over his eyes to hide his face. Dream felt bad, now. His skin was already used to the intensity of the southern sun, especially during the summer, so he was just working with a terrible farmer’s tan he had to even out. He takes off his hat to run a hand through his sweaty hair. But as he moved to put it back on his head, he looked at the white hat in his hands and then to George’s red face.

“Here,” Dream says and he shakes out his bucket hat. George turns to look at Dream and when he does, Dream reaches above him and sits the hat on top of his brown hair. “This will at least keep your face from getting more burnt.”

“Wow, your hat, Dream?” George’s tone was dripping with mock surprise. “What’s next? Your sweatshirt?”

“In your dreams.”

“Who says I’m dreaming about you?”

Dream rolls his eyes at him and he feels George’s shoulder brush against his as George leans back with him. For a minute, Dream lets himself sweat to death under the sun as they look out to the sea and he lets himself feel George’s company. A small gust of wind rustles the dry leaves of the palm tree hanging over them and Dream tilts his chin up to it.

“What are you doing?” George asks. Dream looks at him, but keeps his eyes closed. He can feel George’s eyes on him, making his skin prick.

“The wind feels nice.”

“Are you ready to keep going?”

Dream opens his eyes and looks at George, sitting so close he can feel George’s body heat radiate from him, and he says, “Duh. I’ve been waiting for you to stop pouting.”

“I wasn’t pouting.”

“Sure. We should seriously get moving, though. I don’t want to hold up other people.”

It takes George eight swings to get his ball in the hole. And one more hole-in-one later (made by yours truly), they were standing at the second to last hole- drenched in sweat and seconds away from passing out from heat strokes. But they did it. George still had Dream's hat on his head and small locks of hair stuck up from under the brim and giant sunglasses covering half of his face. He looked ridiculous in the most George-way possible.

"I don't get it," George says, watching Dream knock his ball easily into the hole on his second swing. George's ball was pressed against the bricks and at the farthest point away from the flag, a giant tire blocking its path.

"What?" Dream asks as he fishes for his green ball out of the hole.

"How are you so good at this? I thought you haven't played since the last time you went with your sister."

Dream laughs. "I dunno. There are tons of mini-golfing places in my town and my family used to take us all the time during the summer. It's like...muscle memory, I guess."

George grunts in response and goes to awkwardly hit his ball, balancing on the bricks to free it from being against the wall. He gives it a lame nudge and it rolls a few inches, but at least the tire wasn't blocking it anymore.

"That's three hits for you," Dream reminds him. George nudges it lazily again. "Four-"

"I can count, Dream, I know it's four!" George snaps and Dream raises his hands in mock defense. *Touchy subject. Note to self: George can count, don't forget that*, Dream thought sarcastically as George keeps batting at the ball. *This is getting sad.*

"Do you need help?" Dream asks.

Another swing. *Six*. "No," George says.

"You sure?" *Seven and counting, holy shit*. "George, you already lost. Can I at least help so we can hurry this up and go back to the hotel?"

George gives him a look and then looks down at his ball, letting out a long sigh of defeat. When George shrugs at him, Dream takes that as a yes, and he stands in front of his friend.

"How do you hold your club?" Dream says. George shows him, taking an extra step back. "Okay, your hands are way too far apart. Move them closer."

"Like this?" George moves his hands until they sit on top of each other.

"No. Down a bit?" George moves them back to being too far and Dream internally groans. He knew George was bad, but *this* bad? "No, not like that."

"Then, how, Dream?" George says, annoyed. "How do I hold the club?"

"Like...okay," Dream starts. He closes the space and reaches for George's hands, taking them off of the club and trying to line them up like he would on his own club. "Like that?" He takes a step back and George looked painfully awkward holding it. Then it clicks. "You're left-handed."

"Obviously."

"Okay, wait- hang on," Dream says. He turns his back so he could hold his club with his left hand,

and he tries to memorize his hand positions. “Just line your hands up like this.”

George mimics the positioning, but it still looks wrong.

“Why are you struggling so much?” Dream mumbles. He moves around George to fix his hands again, quietly explaining where his hands should line up, and his fingers flutter around George’s hands. He was trying to be careful. He was trying to not let a touch linger too long in one place as he hovered, adjusting sweaty hands and smelling the hotel soap coming from George.

“What about hitting it?” George asks when Dream’s hands slip away from his. George was looking down at his fixed grip. Dream’s eyes rake up from George’s hands and up his arms, settling on George’s sharp jaw.

“The...ball?” Dream says.

“No, the egg. Yes, Dream, the ball. How do you hit the ball?”

“You just hit it.”

George deadpans. “Okay.”

George then whacks at the ball as hard as he can and Dream jumps back from the swinging club. Despite the powerful swing though, George misses his ball and ends up driving the head of his club into the ground and barely tapping his ball forward.

“You’re joking!” George cries out and Dream bursts into laughter, a painful wheeze squeezing its way from his chest as he staggers back, hands on his knees. “What the hell was that!”

“George-” Dream wheezes softly.

“I hit it and *I missed?!?*”

“George, plea-HA! George, please-”

“Why do I suck at this?! It’s mini-golf!” George sounded so distraught and that might’ve been why Dream laughed harder. Maybe it was a mix between George’s red raccoon eyes and his bad luck with mini-golfing. But as Dream looked at George through giggles, he realized how hard his heart was pounding in his chest, and how under George’s eyes, it seemed to pound just a *bit* harder. Dream stands up straight and pretends to wipe a tear from his eye.

“Gentle, George. Controlled swings, not...whatever you just did,” Dream explains. He moves back to George and just as he’s about to place his hands over George’s, he stops. “Are you good with me...”

“I don’t care.” George’s tone was stiff.

*Doesn’t sound like you don’t care, but alright,* Dream thought as he wraps his hands around George’s on the club, and guides it in his friend’s hands. George’s fingers were cold despite the heat and the clamminess Dream felt was from his own hands. He gently swings the club to give his friend the idea and he goes to step back, but not before stealing a look at George’s face.

“Try it now,” Dream prompts. He walks back to the flag to give his friend space and watches as George taps the ball, sending it straight into the hole. Dream grins. “Just like that!”

George doesn’t respond. Instead, he gives a sharp huff of laughter and turns his back to Dream,

walking to the final hole without bothering to make conversation. Just like that, Dream was back to being confused about how George was feeling. Did he push it with the whole hand thing? *No...no, George said he didn't care if I did that. Plus, George said before he was fine with hand holding. I didn't do anything wrong.*

George still didn't talk as Dream dropped his ball on the final course, hitting it so it bounces against the bricks and obstacles. George's continued silence could help but make him think that maybe, just maybe, he crossed a line without realizing he did.

"Are you...okay?" Dream asks when it's George's turn. His friend struggles for a moment, trying to replicate Dream's hand positioning, but George nods.

"Yeah, why?"

Dream shrugs. "Just asking. You got all quiet."

"I'm concentrating."

That wasn't the response Dream wanted, but he takes it, and watches George's blue ball land in the hole with a noise loud enough to fill their silence.

### 1 p.m

"There y'all are! You enjoy mini-golfin'?" Isla hollers as they emerge from the sandy path. She took one look at their sweat-drenched shirts and exhausted faces, and her red lips pressed into a line.

"It was fun," George offers dryly. Dream nods and he makes a beeline to where Isla sat on the golf cart, ready to go take a cold shower.

"Did Mr. Mark get any good- you know? It's fine, I'll chat with him later. Why don't I get y'all back to your room?" Isla says. Dream gave her a small smile, too distracted by George's mood and too hot to carry a conversation. He just really, *really* hoped Mr. Mark got some pictures so they didn't have to do this again.

Thankfully, Isla read their faces and kept her babbling to a minimum, only turning around to ask them who won (Dream had happily claimed his victory, making George roll his eyes) and what they thought of the course.

"It's pretty," Dream says. "It was just hot."

"Yeah, that's my fault. I thought the day would stay nice like it was this morning, I apologize y'all," she says. "You got some sun, though."

Dream looks down at his tanned arms. "I guess. George...sorry, *Georgie* got burnt, so we have to get some sunscreen."

Isla's dark eyes flick to George, concern on her face. "Is he okay?"

*Oh, great. So I'm not imagining his crappy mood.* "He's fine."

"I don't feel good," George mumbles and Dream looks at him, his annoyance at his mood melting into concern. George's red face looked pale.

“Are you okay?” Dream reaches to him but George ducks out of the way of his hand, giving him a dismissive wave.

“I’m fine.”

Dream kept a close eye on his friend and patted his shoulder, earning a weak smile from George. They pull up to the front of the resort and Dream expected Isla to follow them, but she holds back, and watches as George moves uncomfortably to the glass doors.

“I reckon he’s just overheated,” Isla says. The boys look at her and Dream takes another look at George. *He looks two seconds away from crying or passing out...maybe both if we keep him here.* “Happens all the time, sweetheart. I’ve seen worse cases here and you’ll be just fine, alrighty? You have your boyfriend to help you.”

That makes George smile, looking up at Dream from under Dream’s hat. “I’m so lucky to have him. He *always* knows how to make me feel better.”

*Okay, George. Very funny.* “That’s so sweet of you, Georgie,” Dream plays along and he pinches George’s sunburnt cheek to get back for the lame flirt. George hisses in pain and Isla laughs.

“Don’t drive each other crazy now.”

As soon as her golf cart driver pulls away from the front, Isla on her next mission to kidnap the next couple on her list, George suddenly leans against Dream’s arm and moans.

“George-”

“Can we please go back to our room?”

Dream wraps a supporting arm around George and guides him into the cool hotel. “Yeah...yeah. Come on.”

George was abusing Dream’s support because his friend seemed to drag his feet and complain about how slow Dream was walking. No matter how many times Dream had to remind him that he was walking for the both of them, George didn’t care. *He can flirt but he can’t walk*, Dream thought sourly to himself as they near their room’s door. *Convenient.*

Their room was tidy when Dream finally pushed open the door and George stumbles inside, flopping onto the fluffy bed, and pulling the white hat off his brown hair.

“What is your issue?” Dream asks. “Are you sick or something?”

“I feel like I am. My head hurts and I feel, like, dizzy. And hot.”

“Well, you are sunburnt.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” George mumbles into the mattress.

“You’ll be fine. You’re probably just tired.”

**2:15 p.m**

It was clear George was Not Okay.

He fell asleep curled up on in the middle of the bed and stayed there until Dream finished his icy shower, and when he woke up, he said two words and fell right back asleep. Dream was more annoyed than worried at this point. It was definitely heat exhaustion— he recognized it because his younger sister got it when his family spent a week in Miami one summer. Just like his sister, George was dizzy, burnt, and had a killer headache.

Dream walked over to him and pressed the back of his hand on his forehead. *No fever. That's good.*

Dream remembers his mom buying those gigantic water bottles for his sister and he spends the next five minutes quietly searching their room for water bottles, checking in the mini-fridge and in his backpack. All he could find was a warm, half drunk bottle of water in George's bag.

"Hey," he says and he gently pushes George until brown eyes squint at him. "I'll be right back."

"Where're goin'?" George's words slur from sleep.

"The shop. Stay here and take a shower if you're gonna sleep on my bed. You're getting it all dirty." With that, he shuts the door behind him.

*Water...water...water! There you are.* Dream reaches into the cool fridge and grabs an armful of water bottles for them. The shop was practically empty midday and it had almost everything Dream could think of in there, but shopping was for another day. Right now, he walked to the counter with an ungodly amount of water in his arms.

"Someone's thirsty," the cashier jokes light-heartedly. Dream gives a weak chuckle before something in his memory sparks.

"What's your strongest sunscreen?"

Two bags of water and one bag of a few bottles of sunscreen later, Dream knocks on the door. No answer. *Is he actually sleeping, still?*

He knocks again. "George! Open up!"

"Whossit?"

"Room service."

There's a pause of silence but Dream hears the lock slide and the door opens, George peering through a small crack. "What's the password?" His friend asks.

"George sucks. Now let me in, I have shit for you," Dream responds. He pushes through and dumps the things on the bed. George definitely showered because his dirty clothes sat in a pile in the corner of the room and George wasted no time laying back down on the bed.

"What'd you get?" George asks, already half-lidded.

"Water. When my sister got heat exhaustion, my mom made her drink a lot of water, so I guess you have to, too. And then I got sunscreen and Advil for you," Dream says. George grabs a water bottle.

"Thank you," he says quietly.

Dream smiles. "No problem. Try not to fuck up your sleep schedule."

George's eyes close and Dream turns on the fan even though the room was already chilled from the AC. "Too late," George responds.

### 6 p.m

Dream didn't remember falling asleep, but when he woke up in the blue chair in the corner of the room, he saw George sitting up and flipping through the TV's channel with a very bored look on his face.

"Ugh, oh my God," Dream mutters. His neck hurt.

"Oh, you're up."

Dream checks the time. "How do you feel?"

"A lot better. I drank, like, half of your water bottles and I slept. My head still hurts, though."

"And your face is still red."

George sighs. "How many times are you going to point it out?"

"Until it's not red," Dream says with a grin, "but, it's fine. It's like you're constantly blushing and it works out for us."

"Whatever. I never blush," George responds.

"I'll get you."

"Doubt it. Hey, Dream?"

"George?"

"I'm bored."

*Aaand he's back.* "Okay? What do you want me to do about it?"

"You wanna go walk around?"

Dream is slightly shocked by this offer because George looked like he was two seconds away from dying a few hours ago and George never expressed any interest in this resort at all. Until now. But was Dream going to let this moment blow by him? No. Absolutely not. He wanted to go see the rest of the resort too.

So, that's exactly what they did. Shoving aside their weird closeness at the golf course today and George's sudden heat exhaustion, Dream made sure to walk slowly so George didn't push himself as they strolled down the gold and blue halls of the resort. People were still out and about despite the setting sun over the water. A lot of people were dressed up for the night and going to the pool like the sun was still high in the sky, and that made Dream and George stand out like a sore thumb in their shorts and t-shirts.

"There's so many plants here," George comments as they walk by a potted plant in a hallway.

"Right? That's what I was thinking."



As night falls, everyone swarms to the party rooms and beach, but Dream and George stay inside as the white lights flick on in the resort. It was peaceful as they made plans for when George felt better to go check out the hot tubs and beach, and they talked about renting movies for one night. Things were great between them until...

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite couple!” Isla says behind them. George gives Dream a *you do the talking* look as they turn around.

“Hi, Isla,” Dream says.

“Where are y’all off to? I see George is looking much better.”

Dream shifts on his feet. “We’re just walking around.”

“That’s great...did I show you Mr. Mark’s pictures? They came out great. You guys have such a natural chemistry together that he took some shots of y’all not even near each other, but you can just *see* how much you- aw, dang it! Let me go grab them!”

She turns and disappears around a corner. Dream was fully prepared to wait for their agent to come back and rant to them about their ‘chemistry’ (the word is friendship) but he feels a smooth hand slide into his, and he’s tugged down the hall.

“If we run fast enough, she won’t catch us,” George says as he drags Dream by the hand.

Dream tries to dig his feet into the ground. “C’mon, we can’t just leave her-”

“Dream,” George turns to him and he looks straight into Dream’s eyes. Dream’s breath hitches for a second. “Do you really want to see those pictures?”

*I do...n’t. I don’t. I do? Maybe?* “Um, maybe?” George raises an eyebrow at him. “No,” Dream decides.

“Exactly. We can-”

“George? Dream? Where’d y’all run off to?”

Then Dream is yanked around the corner and he finds himself running behind George, their footsteps echoing in the empty hallways as they try to navigate their way back to their room on the other side of the resort. Dream keeps getting slapped in the face with leaves and he trips over his own feet. But George’s laugh. His friend was giggling at Dream’s failed attempt at running and he pulls Dream harder, yanking him through the hallways. *I’ve never seen him laugh for this long.*

“Oh shit-!” George says and he stops dead in his tracks.

Dream runs straight into his back. “Ow! What? What is it?”

George points and Isla is walking a few feet in front of them, pictures in her hand and Dream feels a pull of curiosity to see them, but he had to admit: dodging Isla was much more fun.

Dream presses a finger to his lips and George covers his mouth to muffle his laughter as they slowly walk backwards, before sprinting in the opposite direction with laughs exploding from them.

“Dream- you were so loud! I thought she was going to hear us-”

“Me?! You couldn’t stop laughing!”

Dream tightens his grip on George's hand and runs in front of him, heard pounding in his chest from the exercise, and he leads them back to the door of their room.

"Come on, come on-" George laughs, slapping his shoulder as Dream fumbles for the key.

"I'm trying! Stop hitting me!"

There's the faint click of heels. "George? Dream? Hi, have you seen a brown-haired London boy and a tall guy with..." Her voice trails off as Dream pushes open the door and George tackles him into the room. Dream races to turn off the lights and George locks the door, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Oh my God," George breathes.

Dream stares at the door as heels walk past their room, pausing briefly at their door. *Don't. Do not knock. We don't want the pictures, just keep walking....we aren't here, Isla.*

There's a quick knock and a muffled, "Dream? Are y'all in there? I got the pictures from Mr. Mark...I figured y'all would want to keep a few!"

A loud snort comes from George and Dream slaps his hand over George's mouth, pulling him to his chest. He felt his own laughter bubble up and he bites his cheek, trying not to laugh at George's suppressed laugh against his hands. *This is so messed up.*

Isla sighs. "Guess not. I'll just...there we go!" Paper slides under the crack and Dream eyes the laminated pictures glinting in the dark room.

Even after she leaves, Dream keeps George pulled to his chest and a hand clamped over his mouth as George continues to laugh. This was the closest Dream has been to George. Even at the golf course, Dream kept a few inches of space and lingered over one of George's shoulders, but right now? George's back was pressed to Dream's racing heart and Dream can feel the heat from George's sunburn on his hand.

"I can't breathe! Dream, I can't- ha! Oh my god," George says, prying Dream's hand off.

"That was so mean," Dream says.

George goes to the pictures and picks them up. "These are terrible."

"Let me see?"

George hands him the pictures and moves on with things, turning the lights back on and settling on the bed to rest as Dream shuffles through the photos. A majority of them were candid of them smiling and laughing at what the other said, but there were three that stuck out to Dream. One of them was when they were making the deal, George standing on top of the bricks so he and Dream were eye to eye. George was grinning and Dream looked surprised at what George said, creating a playful vibe in the picture. The next one was them sitting next to each other with their knees drawn up. Dream couldn't see their faces, but George had his hat on and there was a small sliver of space between their arms. The last one was when Dream was fixing George's hands on the club. From the angle, it looked like Dream had George wrapped in his arms and he was playing the move for George. Dream didn't realize that George was smiling during that, but the picture showed him with a soft smirk.

*Huh.*

“You’re right,” Dream says and he slams them down on the TV stand. “These are terrible.”

“We must be doing a good job then,” George responds.

“Yeah. Go us!”

“Go us!” George agrees, holding his water bottle up to Dream in a cheer.

The night stretches on with them showing each other things on Twitter and Instagram, George eventually moving on to TikTok and settling on the bed next to Dream. George still looked tired, but he wasn’t pale anymore. George looked ready to pass out on the bed again and Dream actually thought he was going to take Dream’s offer of sleeping with a pillow wall, but instead, George rolls off and grabs his two pillows again.

“Seriously?” Dream says. “You were just hogging the bed a few hours ago, why are you sleeping on the floor?”

“No sharing a bed,” is all that George says as he settles on his weak excuse for a bed. Dream sighs and flicks out the lamp.

“You know, we have that rule of not telling people.”

“..Okay?” George says in the dark.

“I just feel bad that you’re sleeping on the floor. No one will say anything if you do come up here, you know. There’s more than enough room.”

George laughs. “Goodnight, Dream.”

Dream sighs and lays on his back, staring up at the ceiling and listens to the rolling waves of the ocean outside. He can hear the loud laughter of couples from here and the faint thud of music from the party rooms below. Everything about this place was romantic. The music that played, the natural flirtiness of everyone around him, the picture perfect sunset- just everything about it screamed movie-like romance. Yet, Dream was here with his best friend, lying to everyone. He wondered if things would feel different if he came here with his next girlfriend. Maybe it would feel more natural to see all the affection around him.

*I wonder what George thinks,* Dream thought as he rolled over. Dream wanted to know why he was so touch and go today, and he wanted to know if George felt the longing to fall in love here too.

Dream’s eyes slip shut. Those were questions for another day.

## Chapter End Notes

AYO @/honkshyguy CAME THROUGH THIS CHAPTER IM SHOWERING HER IN GRATITUDE!!!!

i highly encourage yall to follow her on twt: @/honkshyguy (shes v pog- a wonderful editor too)

I’m also on twt!! i post chapter updates and I’m funny sometimes: @/passmethemo11y

## three

### Chapter Notes

sorry for slow updates!! school got crazy, but updates should be much smoother now  
:) thank you so much for your patience and stick with us here- shy and i have huge plans for this story <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

#### June 14th

##### 8:12 am

The first thing Dream saw when he woke up was the blinding sun beaming through the thin curtains on the balcony doors. The light hurt his eyes and he groaned lightly as he rubbed them, squinting at the glistening waves reflecting rays of sunshine directly into his pupils. Sure, Isla meant well with giving them the most central room in the resort, but Dream couldn't help but think she also did it to get her idea of joke in. *What a painful wake-up call.*

However, the second thing Dream saw was George.

At first, Dream didn't notice since he was still busy rubbing the stabbing pain of sun rays from his eyes. But as he sat up, he finally noticed his friend tucked under the throw blanket at the very edge of the bed. One of George's legs was dangling off and his back was turned to Dream with his body balancing on the lip of the mattress. Dream scoffs lightly as he plucks at a pillow sitting between where he slept and where George slept, eyeing the other two in a conga line against Dream's leg. It was funny. *He built the wall...and then still slept on the very edge of the bed. That can't be comfortable*, Dream thought. George spared one pillow for himself. One. Meanwhile, Dream was practically drowning in fluff and sheets on his side of the bed.

George, as if he had sensed Dream was up, suddenly rolled over and shifted so he wasn't dangerously close to tumbling off of the bed, but he stayed asleep, and Dream relaxed a bit. Dream gazed down at George as he grabbed a handful of his blonde hair. The bright sun wavered on George's pink face like golden water as the curtains fluttered from the fan, and it made his dark eyelashes stand out against his cheeks. Dream could see light freckles showing because of the sunburn and they were clustered on the bridge of his nose before slowly dissolving out across his cheeks.

He knew George was pretty. He wasn't blind or stupid. Dream saw the pictures on Twitter and all those edits, so it was safe to say that he was not the only one who knew about George's effortless looks. But here, in the morning sun, was a whole new level of effortless Dream saw. George's hair was ruffled and dark against stark white pillowcases and lips parted slightly as light breaths puff out them slightly. Dream wiped the dry drool from his own mouth and cringed. He doubted he slept as nicely as George did.

"Okay..." Dream whispers to himself, shaking his head. *Don't be a creep, Dream. Staring at people is weird, especially when they're sleeping.* He gives a quick look at the pictures from yesterday on the TV stand. *Definitely weird when they're your fake boyfriend too.*

Just as he reaches for his phone on the charger, he hears a sharp knock at their door and it makes his heart jump into his throat. George's face scrunches, but he still doesn't wake up. Dream, as slowly and deliberately as he could, slides out of bed and tiptoes over to the door. Through the peephole, he can see Isla smiling as she waits for him to open the door with her clipboard stacked with papers and notes.

Mustering up his energy to talk to her, he opens the door. "Good morning, Isla!"

"Dream! Hello, how are- I'm sorry, do you prefer Dream or Clay?" Her voice was loud in the silence of the hallway and Dream looks back to his friend before stepping out and shutting the door behind him. George needed the sleep.

"Um, Dream is fine," he responds.

"Okay, good! Because I know you put 'Clay' on the contract, but I noticed that George calls you by your Youtube name so I was just curious to know if that's the name you prefer," Isla says. Before Dream could explain that George pretty much only knows him as 'Dream', she swiftly moves on and folds her hands in front of her. "Anyway, I came here to tell y'all to get hustling because the next activity the resort has planned for the ad leaves in an hour. I just know you and George are going to love it! It's out on this boat and it takes you out a few miles offshore-"

"Boat?" Dream stops her.

She nods eagerly. "A boat! It's beautiful out there and there's plenty of room to sunbathe and go swimmin'!"

"Um..." *How do I phrase this without being rude?* "George got really burnt yesterday, remember? I don't think it'll be smart to have him back out in the sun already."

"Oh, that's right!" Isla pauses to think for a second, chewing on her red lips.

"Do you think we could do indoor stuff? Or is the boat-"

"Set in stone? No, not at all! We can...we can hold off on that..." She says, but Isla sounds uncertain. Dream felt bad for putting a dent into her clearly thought out agenda for them, but Dream was not risking skin cancer or sun poisoning for George. This was their time together and Dream didn't want George to spend every second hating it. So, he didn't budge even as she pulled the hotel phone from her hip and spoke quickly to someone, muttering apologies for making them hold the boat. Dream leaned against the door frame as she hung up, mumbling something in Spanish under her breath.

"Sorry about that! Tom can be a bit cranky, but y'all don't need to worry about the boat anymore," she says. "We can do some rearranging here, but y'all might be with a few other couples that are here for the project. Is that alright with you?"

*George is going to hate whatever she's about to say.* "Yeah! Yeah, that's fine. We don't care." *I don't care. George does.*

"Great! There's a cooking course happening at around noon today, so it would be amazing if y'all could stop in and join us!" Isla pulls a sticky note that was clipped to her clipboard, scribbling out the room number and time before handing it to him.

"Awesome," Dream says half-heartedly.

"I'm gonna be in there with a photographer since we're supposed to be shooting photos of another

couple, but I'll tell them to sneak in a few pictures of y'all." Isla winks like she was doing them a huge favor before the phone on her hip rings, making her give a quick nod to say goodbye. Dream watches as she leaves, clutching their ticket into some couple cooking course, and he couldn't help but laugh to himself. What got him here? What got him into the Florida Keys, with *George* out of all people, and made him sign up for a cooking class? Dream couldn't make anything but spaghetti and the occasional steak.

George was not going to be happy about them being around Isla- or anyone for that matter. Being around people meant they had to act and George hated acting unless he got to mess with Dream. Dream sighs as he walks back into the room, thinking, *Is he going to be moody today because I woke him up or because I signed us up in a cooking class? Place any bets now.*

"Hey, George," Dream leans down to his friend's ear. "Wake up!" No response. Not even an eyelid twitch. Dream stands up straight and starts shaking George's arm. "C'mon, George! Up and at 'em!"

Nothing except George's lips pressing together briefly.

"Geeeeeeeeoooooohrrrrggggeeee," Dream draws out and that makes George's eyes open a bit, but his friend quickly shuts them again. Dream didn't miss it though. "I saw that! I saw you open your eyes- get up!"

"No," George finally mumbles.

"Wake up. Isla stopped by."

"I don't care."

"George, seriously. Wake up, we have to be somewhere in a few hours and we still have to get dressed and go eat and-"

George turns to look at him over his shoulder, brown eyes like melted chocolate in the bright sun. "Yeah, in a few *hours*. Lemme sleep."

"If you don't wake up, I'm getting food without you," Dream threatens.

"I don't care, Dream. I'm tired."

"Fine. But you'll have to go by yourself."

George groans, but sits up and swings his legs over the bed, blinking away the sleep in his eyes. His sunburn didn't look as bad as it did yesterday- the flaming red dying down to a pink stain- but Dream still didn't like the idea of George going outside so soon. He definitely made the right call by canceling the boat for today.

"What are we even doing? Why was Isla here so early?" George asks, watching Dream move around the room to gather his things to get ready.

*Rip off the band-aid, Dream. Just rip it off.* "We..." he sighs, "are going to a couple's cooking class."

"Oh."

"Isla had us going out on some boat today but I told her that you didn't want to do it because of your sunburn," Dream says. Okay, yeah, he lied a bit- but the last thing he needed was to give

George that satisfaction that Dream was worried about him. It would go straight to George's pretty little head.

"Wait- boat? Dream, that sounds way cooler than a cooking class."

"Weren't you the one that almost passed out from heat exhaustion? Yeah. No way you're going out on a boat right now," Dream responds from the bathroom. He hears George sigh and get up from the bed. As Dream brushes his teeth, he looks at George standing in the doorway in the large mirror. "Oh, c'mon. You like cooking, right?"

"Kinda, yeah."

"So it'll be fine," *Play dumb. Don't tell him about taking more pictures.* "It's only for, like, two hours and then we can leave and go check out the arcade we walked by last night." George's eyes leave Dream's in the mirror as he looks down at the tiled floor, thinking. "I mean, you did pull me into mini-golfing yesterday," Dream adds.

"Ugh, whatever. At least I can totally own you in cooking," George quips, a small smile on his face now.

"It's not a competition. We're literally supposed to cook *together*," Dream says before spitting in the sink.

"Are you scared of losing, Dream?"

"It's not a competition!"

"Sounds like you're scared." Dream rolls his eyes at George's taunts because he knew that his friend was all talk here, but things would be different once they actually went to the cooking room. Dream looks up at George again in the mirror. He looked like he wanted to say something.

Dream turns around fully to look at him. "What?"

"...What?" George asks back, giving him a weird look.

"You look like you wanna say something and I have to get changed, so either say it or go away."

George's jaw clenches for a moment, a slow blush creeping on his neck. "I just- sorry."

"For what?"

"For coming up, you know? On the bed...without telling you..."

Dream takes one look at George and this was one of the rare times that Dream could read him like an open book. George was trying really hard to look anywhere but at Dream with his head bowed slightly to hide the embarrassed flush on his face. Dream wanted to make a joke about George going back on his own rule, but something in him makes the jab die in his throat and he shrugs, turning away to face the mirror.

"What do you mean? You were sleeping on the floor all night."

The smile that George gave was amazing and it felt way better than making some petty joke.

"You're such an idiot," George mutters as he leaves.

As Dream finishes up in the bathroom, he can't help but remember George's peaceful face on the

pillow next to him and he didn't notice the tiniest bit of a smile on his face until he looks back at himself in the mirror right before he leaves. *I am an idiot, aren't I?*

**12:15 p.m**

It was clear that Dream had gotten them in way over their heads and the class hadn't even started yet.

"Dream," George says to him as they stand behind their counter.

"I know. Trust me," Dream responds and the two of them look out at all the other couples in front of them- either hugging or openly flirting with one another. "I *know*."

Isla was sitting in the corner of the room and chatting with the instructor, twirling a strand of dark hair around her finger. Dream felt weird looking at Isla flirt, but there was nowhere else to look. No matter how hard he tried to keep his eyes away from the actual couples here, he found himself sneaking glances at them whenever they laughed or brushed shoulders. George was far from him and picking up the box of graham crackers sitting on their counter. If their act wasn't obvious before, it should definitely be obvious now.

"What are we even making?" George asks.

"How am I supposed to know?" Dream responds, taking the box from him and placing it back down. George picks up the glass bowl.

"You signed us up for this."

"That literally doesn't mean anythi- what the hell are you doing?" Dream watches as George lifts the bowl to his face and looks at Dream through the thick glass.

George giggles. "Look, if I do this- your face gets all wonky."

"Wait, actually?"

"Yeah! Hold on-" George bends back slightly and turns the bowl in his hands, biting back more laughter. "If I do this, your face, like, swirls."

"Let me see." George goes to give Dream the bowl and their fingertips brush, Dream jumping slightly from the sudden touch, and he ignores how his heart speeds up slightly as he holds the bowl up. Sure enough, George's face was bloated and distorted through the glass and Dream chuckles. "That's so dumb."

George goes to retort something, but a loud clap stops him. "Alrighty, class! Let's get this moving," the chef says from the front. "I'm Dan and I'm head baker here at the Moonlight Resort! I started working here..."

His voice trails off until it goes mute in Dream's head as he zones out, staring at the ingredients in front of him. George's hands were resting on the top of the counter as he turned a mixing spoon in his fingers. Dream looks at Isla, who seemed to be watching them and them only. Which made sense, honestly. Taking one look around the room, everyone was standing uncomfortably close to each other as Dan spoke, and he and George were the only ones keeping a solid distance apart. He takes a step in George's direction.



“Now, I see everyone is wearing their best clothes-” Dan gives a pointed look to George, who was wearing shorts and a baggy t-shirt, and Dream felt a growing dislike for the chef. “-so all I ask is that you guys grab an apron from the drawers under your counter.”

Dream holds eye contact with the chef for a second before an apron is shoved into his chest.

“This is dumb,” George whispers. They slide it over their heads and Dream couldn’t help but agree. The white aprons were yellowed from past classes, which grossed Dream out a bit, and they had pink flowers along the trim. No one else in the class had the old aprons. The other couples pulled out crisp, new aprons and helped each other tie them around their waists- no flowers, no stains, and no awkward fumbling.

“Oh my God,” Dream curses under his breath as he drops the strings of the apron again. He wasn’t coordinated enough to tie a knot behind his back, making the apron slack against his waist. And as if this whole thing wasn’t mortifying enough, everyone was waiting for Dream to get his on. Even George managed to tie his and was watching with a smug look on his face.

“You need help, Dream?” George asks. Dream’s eyes lift to the other couples’ watchful eyes and his face burns.

“Yes,” he mumbles. George snorts and walks behind him, tugging on the strings, and Dream can feel his friend’s fingers on his spine as he ties it. Chef Dan gives Dream a pitiful smile which makes Dream suppress a glare, directing his attention to the counter.

“Today’s class is all about Key Lime pie. Now, this has been traced back all the way to the 20th century and found here- in the Florida Keys! They say that sponge fishermen used to make this delicacy when they would go out to sea. They used non-perishable goods like canned milk, limes, and eggs. Now, obviously, we’ve changed the ingredients to make it as heavenly as possible! No fishy-tasting pie here!” Chef Dan jokes and everyone laughs but Dream and George. They exchange a look with each other and George gives him a small shrug. They were both thinking the same thing: *That was a terrible joke and nobody should’ve laughed at that.*

“Well aren’t you two adorable,” a woman next to them says.

“Excuse me?” Dream asks.

“Oh! Sorry, didn’t mean to step on any toes there. It’s just... *amazing* how diverse this place is. Me and my Joey here have been coming here every month since it opened since we’re good friends with the owner. We just don’t see guys like you often!”

Dream’s eyes widen a bit and he looks at George, who looked like he was seconds away from walking out, yet his face was completely neutral as he says, “Well, they’ll let anyone into the resort now, I guess.”

Dream thought the woman was being petty, but there was an underlying insult to George’s words that made Dream kind of surprised. The woman seemed to pick up on it because she gives them a forced smile and gives a look to her husband.

“Hmph. Well, I wish you guys the best of luck with your Key Lime pie. Hope it doesn’t come out too sour,” she says.

“Hope yours doesn’t come out too watery,” George responds and the woman’s eyes narrow at him, but Dream leans in front of him, and that seems to be the first time she fully sees Dream. Her eyes travel up to his as he stands up straighter.

"Thanks, but we got this. We don't need luck, right, George?" Dream asks.

"Right," George agrees.

The woman blinks up at Dream's height and she doesn't respond, turning back to 'her Joey' and cowering slightly into his arm. Dream turns back to George.

"You good?"

George nods. "Yeah, I'm good, thanks," George lowers his voice, "but now we have to out bake her."

"It's easy! It's just a few ingredients, how hard can it be?"

It wasn't hard, just like Dream thought. But between the petty side comments of the woman next to him and Chef Dan's disappointed looks, Dream's competitive side came out. He tried to not let George's slow mixing get to him. He tried to watch patiently and he pretended like he didn't notice that they were falling behind on instruction- everyone else filling their pie pan with the graham cracker crust.

"Can I- you got it, George?" Dream asks. He didn't want to rip the spoon out of his friend's hands, but *fuck*, it was tempting.

George keeps smushing the butter on the side of the bowl. "Yeah, I got it."

"You *sure*? 'Cause I don't mind helping out...you've been the only one mixing."

"I'm sure," George says before a hidden smile shows on his face. "Why? Does it bother you?"

Yes. "No, no. I just don't want to fall behind everyone."

"*You know*-" a pointed voice comes from behind Dream and he glances over his shoulder to Ms.Snobby next to them. "I'm so glad that we work together so well! It would be a..." She glances back to Dream and looks at him up and down. "A real *pity* if I left all the work to you, Joey."

"Well," Dream says, yanking George's wrist and forcing his hand into his friend's sticky one. "Good thing we're working together."

"Really?" She asks. Her eyebrow arches and her eyes flick over to George. His hand was stiff in Dream's and Dream couldn't imagine how uncomfortable his face must've looked because just like a hound, she seemed to sniff out the unnatural tension between them. A slow smile spreads on her lips.

Dream doesn't back down. "Yes, really."

"I just find it *so* strange how you guys seem to be the only couple here to, like, not touch each other," she says.

"Do we have to?" George speaks up, stepping forward a bit with the glass bowl still scooped in his arms. Dream and the other couple's attention turns on him and George shrinks back a bit shyly. "I mean, PDA makes us uncomfortable, that's all."

Ms. Snobby's eyes widen. "Honey- *uncomfortable*?! You're at a couple's resort, you know that?"

"Yeah...yes, I do," George mumbles and he shrinks further back behind Dream. Fierce anger flares in Dream's gut at the woman's condescending tone and he was starting to get really tired of her

shit-talking. George was an idiot for bringing up PDA in front of other couples, but no one else (Except for Dream) could give him shit for being uncomfortable.

“We know where we are,” Dream says.

“Are you sure? Because ever since you got here- you’ve stood five feet apart and there was barely any small talk,” she points out.

Dream stands up straighter. “It’s none of-”

“-our business? We know. But it’s just a bit weird how *friendly* you guys are acting. I would hate for that spark of love to die between you guys so quickly. Especially in the Florida Keys, right?” She smiles and Dream’s skin prickles at the word ‘friendly’.

*Does she know? No way she knows. Not a chance she figured that out in the fifteen minutes we’ve been here,* Dream thought. He feels George’s hand slip from his, but George doesn’t move away as his friend waits to see what Dream was going to say. But Dream couldn’t say anything. If he kept fighting back, it would be obvious he’s over-defending their ‘relationship’ and it wouldn’t make sense. The woman seems to know that he was holding his tongue because she goes on to add:

“Help your boyfriend, sweetie, and tell him to get comfortable with PDA. The agents love that sorta thing.”

Dream glares at her as she turns back to her husband. *Of course you’re the other couple here on the contract. Of course you are.*

Dream needed a plan. Even after the petty conversation between them and the other couple, George went back to mindlessly mixing, standing far from Dream, and Dream stayed silent. They learned nothing. Yet, Ms. Snobby’s words still bounced in Dream’s brain. *It’s just a bit weird how friendly you guys are acting.*

Dream lets out an annoyed sigh as he looks around the room and to everyone else around them- being reminded that, despite her harsh tone, Ms. Snobby was right. Couples and love fill the room with a buzz as they all bump shoulders and blow graham cracker dust into each other’s faces. No one cared here. Everyone was in their own little world with each other and the more Dream eavesdropped and watched, the more he desperately wanted that personal bubble around him. Even Ms. Snobby and Joey next to them were joking around with each other- any ounce of pettiness left their features as they slipped into their own love bubble.

“Scrub the lime,” George orders and Dream snaps out of his daze, looking down at the dark green fruit being shoved in his hands. “You look stupid standing there.”

“I offered to mix-” Dream says, grabbing the file to zest the lime’s skin, “-but it seems like you had it.” They look down at the clumpy, cat litter looking mixture in the bowl and Dream presses his lips together. *Maybe not, nevermind.* “Do you want me to-”

“I got it.”

Dream rolls his eyes to himself as he starts to scrub the lime, turning away as George dumps the crust into their pan. He cringes when the couple in front of them laugh loudly. *C’mon George...* He spares a glance at his friend, who was biting his lip in concentration as he flattens the graham cracker crust. *Don’t make this harder than it has to be. Don’t make me the bad guy here.*

Dream doesn’t mean to, but he stares at an older couple from across the room with their arms around each other. They were rocking to silent music as they waited for Chef Dan to continue with

the class. The woman had a large red flower tucked behind her ear and the skinny man gently brushed his fingers against her plump cheek, fluttering up to fix the rich petals in her gray hair. It was a tender moment and Dream knew it was weird to watch it- hell, he felt like he was intruding on something- but he couldn't make himself look away. The longer he watched their old love turn young in front of him, the more the deep pit in his stomach grew, and the faster he scrubbed at the lime. Dream clenches the lime tighter in his grip as the sour smell sweeps up into his eyes, making them water, and the elderly couple touches noses just as Dream feels lime juice burst in his hand.

"Dream! Dream, relax, you're going to cut your fingers off," George says and he grabs Dream's wrist to snap him out of his thoughts. Dream comes to a slow stop with his zesting, a pile of deep green on the counter and lime juice spilling over his fingers, and George gently tugs his hand away from the file, but continued to hold on to it. "Don't zone out while zesting."

"I didn't zone out. I'm just..." *Staring like a creep at some strangers.* "...making sure we have the zestiest key lime pie out of everyone here," Dream responds. George still doesn't let go of Dream's wrist and Dream didn't want to look at him, already embarrassed for almost getting hurt. But on the bright side- he found the word he was looking for.

*Jealous. I am jealous.*

George's eyes roam on his face for a second longer before his fingers finally slide off of his wrist. "I think we have more than enough. You made enough zest for, like, three pies." It was a dry joke to relax Dream and it worked a bit because he found himself smiling as he picks up a little zest, flicking it into George's face so green flakes cling to his cheeks like new freckles.

### 12:36 p.m

Dream didn't know if it was his competitiveness making him feel the urge or if it was some hidden wish- but he found himself being pulled towards George. However, since Dream didn't feel any sort of thing for his friend, he went ahead and gave in to his competitiveness with the couple next to them.

He tried to be lowkey about it. He really did. It started off small: a mutual glare of annoyance between him and Ms. Snobby, followed by her suddenly laughing loudly and throwing a love-filled hug around her husband's neck, pressing an extravagant kiss to his lips. Then, in defense for their wobbly fake relationship, Dream scooted closer to George until their shoulders were pressed against each other and Dream forced a laugh at George's silence, placing an awkward hand on George's forearm.

"Dream, what are you-?"

"Just let it happen," Dream had said through a gritted smile, throwing a gaze over his shoulder. Ms. Snobby's light eyes were on them too and Dream knew he made a mistake picking a fight with her. She was everything George hated- bold, out there, and very adamant about PDA with her husband. She knew this, too. She knew this and so she made direct eye contact with Dream as she took the spoon from her husband's hand, pressing it quickly against his lips so the bright green filling stuck to him, and then she placed yet another kiss onto his lips. *Oh, come on, now. That's not fair.*

Jealousy pricked at his stomach and he watched as Isla grinned at Ms. Snobby and her husband, mouth moving quickly to direct the photographer to them, before giving Dream and George a polite smile. For the first time since they got here- Isla wasn't focused on them and Dream didn't like it, surprisingly. George didn't seem to care, though. Fuck it- he was completely oblivious to

everything around him as he dumps the cup of key lime juice into their radioactive looking pie filling. Ms. Snobby gave Dream a pitiful look like she wanted to say: *Aw, looks like your sugar honey sweetheart doesn't want you.*

Her made-up words fuel the fire building in Dream's chest. Ms. Snobby and her husband pose for the camera, blinding smiles on their faces with green on their lips, and then she looks back to Dream as she slides an arm around her husband's waist. This was Dream's breaking point. This was the point where all the minor shoulder brushes and light touches here and there didn't matter anymore and didn't mean anything to her. She was winning with the perfect pie and the perfect photos- and Dream was fed up with her. He would show her.

So, he did.

In a swift motion, Dream yanks the bowl from George to take away his friend's distraction, but he completely forgot how hard George was mixing and how tight his grip on the bowl was. As Dream tries to fight against George, who suddenly lets go of the glass bowl, the mixing spoon flicks up at them and sends sour filling straight into their faces and the glass bowl clattering on the counter. The room falls silent as everyone turns to stare with mouths open. Dream wipes a green glob from his eye. *Well, that wasn't supposed to happen.*

"Dream!" George cries out, looking down at the green staining his white t-shirt. "What the hell is-"

"Oh my goodness! Are y'all alright? Did any lime juice get in your eyes?" Isla interrupts as she dashes over to them, not sure what to do to help.

"We're fine," Dream says. The heat from his embarrassed blush was melting the unmixed butter in the filling.

Isla looks around. "Ah, shoot! Let me grab y'all some napkins- how'd that even happen?"

"Good question," George grumbles low enough so only Dream can hear, and Dream winces. Isla doesn't pay attention to George because she was already off scurrying around the room to look for napkins to help clean up. "Why *did* you do that?" George asks.

"I was- I dunno, I saw the camera and I panicked," Dream lies. Ms. Snobby was giggling behind their back and Dream ignores the lick of annoyance in his gut, too busy taking the furious glare from George.

"So, what? You threw our pie all over us?"

"Not...intentionally. I didn't realize you had the death grip on this thing." Dream flicks the glass bowl.

"I was trying to mix! Of course I had a death grip, you idiot."

"Duly noted for next time."

George sighs and green slides down his cheek. "We were doing so well..."

"Well, to be fair, this is like the easiest pie to make."

"And you managed to mess it up," George says. Dream feels sticky as the filling starts to dry on his face, clothes, and hands, and he feels gross watching green goop run down George's cheekbone before dripping down onto his shirt. Dream's competitiveness suddenly dies and he forgets the

woman's taunting comments behind him as guilt takes over. George did seem to be into the cooking class. It made sense- Dream knew his friend liked to cook things, and now George's next creation was sliding down his face and in Dream's hair. Without thinking, Dream reaches out and wipes at the green on George's face gently.

George's face was smooth and cold. Still pink from the sun. Still showing light freckles. Still so, very *George*.

Dream sees George's eyes widen a fraction in shock at the sudden tender touch and he pulls away, hand grabbing Dream's wrist. "What are you doing?"

Dream shrugs to show a green finger. "You got something on your face."

"Oh, haha. You're so funny."

"I am!" Dream says, a grin creeping up. George looks up to the ceiling, but Dream saw that hidden smile.

"We got a comedian here, huh?"

"I should do stand up."

George drops Dream's hand with a scoff. "Jeez, don't let it go to your head."

Seeing the anger leave George's eyes relaxes Dream a bit and he feels the guilt settle into relief. They stare at each other with eyes taking in all the sweet and sour green on them, before Dream finally looks away with a slight tingle on his wrist from George's touch.

"Here! Here, oh my goodness-" Isla says once she comes back, shoving paper napkins from the dining hall into their hands. "Y'all are so messy, *Dios mío* ..." she mumbles. She dabs at the green on Dream's shirt and he could see the faint worry lines on her forehead, soft wrinkles and eyebags under her focused eyes.

George makes a disgusted noise as he wipes green off of his face and Dream can't help but laugh a bit at his failed plan. Thank God George had no idea what he was trying to do because Dream would've never heard the end of it if George knew.

"Are you laughing?" Ms. Snobby asks.

Dream looks at her and Isla pauses her dabbing, curious with the tension between the two couples. *Well...couple and 'couple'*. "Uh, yeah. Yeah, I am."

"You made a mess! It got all the way over here!"

"I'm so sorry, ma'am-" Isla starts to apologize but Dream wasn't going to let her take the hit for him. He was more than capable of fighting his own battles.

Dream swoops up filling from his shirt and sticks it in his mouth as he says, "Green is a great color on you."

The woman's eyes narrow and she stomps a foot on top of a glob on the floor. Was she jealous? Hardly. And Dream knew that the accusation was getting under her skin because she opened her mouth to say something, but with their agent right there, neither of them continued with the petty comments. Instead, she rolls her eyes and huddles against her husband, wiping green from her arm. *Victory has never tasted so horrible*, Dream thought as he swallows a gag at the intense sour and

cheesy taste of the filling. *Maybe I did us a favor.*

As they finish cleaning up and George mixes what little filling they have left, Ms. Snobby made it clear that their war was far from over. She mutters something to her husband who comes behind her to wrap hairy arms around her waist as she mixes, batting her eyes for the camera. Dream had to give it to her- she was smart. She was smart to put on a show for the ad people because Isla was eating this up with encouraging smiles and thumbs-ups. Ms. Snobby was smart enough to sniff out George's weirdness with PDA and use it against them. But Dream still wasn't done trying to make her shut up. He spent hours thinking about him and George's fake relationship and he wasn't about to let it die by some lady wearing cheetah printed flats.

"Georgie?" Dream says sweetly and loud enough for the woman to hear.

Immediately, George looks up to see where Isla is, but his face twists in confusion when he doesn't see her anywhere near them. "What?"

"You need help mixing?"

"No. Why do you keep asking that? I got it."

"No, no. I think you need help, *right?*" Dream asks with a pointed look. George blinks at him. *Yeah, no. He didn't catch on.*

"I... got it..." George says slowly.

"Okay," Dream lowers his voice, "you remember yesterday? The bet we made?"

"Kinda. What about it?"

"I won."

"...And?"

*Are you fucking serious-* "And that means I get to break a rule, right?" Dream sees it click in George's mind and his friend's face flushes so slightly that Dream barely noticed it. Dream can see his friend hesitate, his nose wrinkling in discomfort for a second. "Just this once, George. But we really don't have to if you don't want."

The woman's waiting gaze burns the back of his neck and Dream holds his breath as George tries to figure out whether or not to trust him. Dream tosses his head back to Ms. Snobby and the photographer. George's brown eyes move over his shoulder to the woman wrapped in her husband's arm and a flicker of realization ripples across his features. George read his mind.

"Oh...y-yeah! Yeah, it's fine." George shifts and holds still as Dream swallows his pride, slowly walking behind George. Yet, despite the satisfaction of watching Ms. Snobby's eyes widen a bit at the action, his arms hover around George like he was scared to touch him. George's hair tickled the bottom of Dream's chin and George kept mixing, though it was slower this time. Dream wanted to back up. He wanted to give George that space that he wanted- that he made *rules* for- and he didn't want to push George too far.

"Oh my God-" George sighs and suddenly, he drops the spoon with a clatter and he grabs Dream's hands. Dream watches with a pounding heart as his friend personally wraps Dream's arms around his torso, before making his fingers lock together so he's holding on to George. Dream's elbows were digging into George's ribs. He couldn't move. His muscles refused to relax as his fingers brushed the top of George's shorts through his sticky t-shirt and Dream's face was hot enough to

bake their pie right here, right now.

Ms. Snobby's eyebrows shoot up. She was clearly impressed that they were bold enough to do such a move after spending the whole class feet apart.

Suffocating silence falls over them. *I have to say something. I have to.* "I'm sorry."

George's rough mixing doesn't stop. "For what?"

Dream didn't respond because he didn't want to admit that he knew this was weird and state the painfully obvious. Instead, he dug his fingernails into the back of his hand as he holds George carefully- like his friend was going to shatter into a million pieces if he put any more weight on his torso. Dream's stomach hurt. From the gross filling and from his nerves.

"Are you doing the *Titanic* pose or something? You look a little uncomfortable there," Ms. Snobby jabs. *And she's no longer impressed with us. Fantastic.*

"Well, I mean, he's mixing. I don't wanna get in the way," Dream responds.

She huffs. "Please. He shouldn't be using that much arm movement anyway."

"He's *fine*. Worry about your own pie," Dream snaps.

Another huff. "*Our* pie is the best here. We've taken this course multiple times and my Joey is a chef for--"

"What? McDonald's?" George speaks up. Dream can feel the tension radiating off of George, who was also clearly fed up with this woman's big nose in their business. Dream bites back a smile at the insult when the woman's face drops in surprise.

"Hardly. He's a chef for a *very* fancy restaurant," she says.

"Oh, yeah?" George says and she nods, an evil smile on her face as her husband holds her protectively against his chest. Dream wasn't intimidated and neither was George. Dream opens his mouth to say something, but George slips a hand up to Dream's cheek, grabbing his jaw and gently tugging Dream's face down so their eyes meet. Dream's stomach flips at the unfamiliar move as green and brown clash into each other. Despite George's gentle touch, Dream felt like his jaw was bruised. "Dream, I say we get the name so you can take me to this place."

Dream was frozen for a second, wild eyes searching George's face for any hint of what he was doing or what he was going to do. When he finally snaps out of it, he nods once.

"Of course."

George holds his gaze for a second longer, reading Dream's panicked state, and a cocky grin appears. But, he lets go and turns back to the woman, and Dream's world zooms back to reality as he unfreezes. "What was the name again? Didn't catch it."

"Not important," she says, her voice faltering from cocky to embarrassed. *It's definitely some fast food place, isn't it?* Dream asked her in his head, letting his smile through. George leans into him and lays his head back against Dream's shoulder.

"You didn't add enough condensed milk, by the way," George adds. It was the final nail in the coffin for Ms. Snobby, who turned pink as she looked up to her husband for his defense, but he shrugs at her.



“Well played,” is all she says. In a last stitch of effort to one-up them, she grabs her husband’s hands and holds them to her stomach as he places a quick kiss to her cheek. Unlucky for her, Dream and George had a lot of practice with hand-holding. It was easy for their hands to find each other in mutual agreement to make this woman shut up, and Dream lifts his chin in triumph as George grips his hand, mirroring Ms. Snobby’s pose. Dream didn’t have to, but he balanced his chin at the top of George’s head and gave her a quick wink.

That was the end of their war and once they knew for sure she wasn’t looking at them again, Dream practically yanks himself away from George and he lets the cool air flood the new space between them.

“We’re not doing that again,” George mutters as he scrapes the green filling into their pan. Dream wants to help, but he watches mindlessly as the key lime pie pools into their lumpy crust. So he nods. “You got your reward.”

“Please- it was barely a reward,” Dream says. It was awkward. It made things tense between them. George felt further than ever despite being two feet away, but Dream couldn’t help but think about George’s move to get Dream to look at him. It was so smooth- so *practiced* - that it didn’t feel like George at all. George didn’t have to do that. Then again, Dream didn’t have to put his chin on his head either. *I mean, I guess it makes some sense*, Dream reasoned to himself. *We are fake dating. These pictures better be good because if they aren’t-*

“Can we agree to never do that again?” George jokes dryly, but Dream didn’t miss the cold discomfort in his tone.

“We don’t have to, don’t worry,” Dream assures softly. George’s eyes meet his and they study each other a bit, a silent promise being made, and Dream feels a small pull at his heart when George smiles at him.

### 5 p.m

“Wow. You suck, George.”

The air hockey puck shoots straight into George’s goal. The loud clatter makes George throw his head back in a frustrated groan and he fishes for it, slamming it back down.

“Best out of ten,” George challenges.

“Ten?! George, we’re not playing until ten goals-”

“If you make ten goals I’ll give you ten dollars.”

Dream gets in a ready stance at the mention of money, hand gripping the bright orange shooter. “Might as well just pay me now- I’m four ahead of you.”

“No chance, Dreamie.”

The purple puck slowly slides to the center and the two enter a standoff, waiting for the other to make the first lunge to it, and the quiet humming of the table fills their concentrated silence. After a minute, Dream takes the first swing and he jabs his arm out and the sudden movement makes George jump and lift his hands off of the table, which sends the puck straight into his slot again. Dream barks out in laughter as George looks at the puck, confused.

“Oh my God!” Dream cries, bracing himself against the table. “Five to zero, George!”

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Oh, come on now-”

“You cheated! It’s not fair.”

Dream shakes his head at him. “How did I cheat?! How *can* I cheat?”

“I don’t know! I just know you did. You probably added extra slidey stuff on the puck,” George reasons through a giggle.

“What?! No! No way! You just suck at this.”

“Shut up! You were stressing me out-”

“No, you’re just jumpy.”

“Whatever. You cheated. I win. Give me ten dollars, Dream.”

“Okay, first of all,” Dream says, folding his arms, “you wanted to play and you made the deal. I never agreed to give you ten dollars. Second of all, I brought you to a five-star resort. That should be payment enough.”

“I have to be your boyfriend. That’s more of a punishment than anything,” George responds.

“I dunno, you seemed to like it earlier today.”

The joke made George’s movements stutter as he places the puck back down, but his friend recovers and shoots it into Dream’s unguarded slot. “Anything to make that lady shut up.”

“True.”

Dream lets George catch up to him with goals, the dark game room reeking of sweat and alcohol from the bar next to them. After spending a few minutes looking at all the casino games, George ended up dragging Dream over to the air hockey table since this seemed to be the only thing that piqued both of their interests. Yet, standing here watching George shoot (And miss, like, half of his shots), Dream grew bored and he threw his air hockey grip down on the table.

“This is getting sad,” Dream comments, watching the puck ricochet against the sides of the table. “It didn’t go in and I’m not even blocking my goal.”

“Because you’re cheating.”

“I’m not cheating! George, it’s five to six now- I should call you the cheater!”

“No, I don’t care. You’re making it hard to-”

“I’m not even touching it!” Dream cries and George laughs, knowing damn well he was getting under Dream’s skin.

George sets the puck in the dead center on the table. “Dream, what’s the chance I make this shot and make it five to seven?”

“I don’t know- probably, like, 50/50-”

“No, I’m gonna say one in 7.5 trillion,” George says and Dream rolls his eyes at the joke. *So funny, George. How original.*

“Ha-fucking-ha, you’re funny tonight, aren’t you?” Dream snaps. George leans over the table and hits the puck, sending it straight into his goal, and George meets his eyes.

“That was payback for your lame joke back at the class.”

“What joke?”

“*‘Oh, you got something on your face,’*” George mimics his voice. “That one.”

*Oh, right, the face touch thing.* “At least my joke is original. I hear yours all the time in my Twitter replies.”

“I’m surprised people even reply to your Twitter. Last time I checked, it seemed like your account was dying.”

“To be fair, I still tweet way more than you do. You just reply to the same three people.”

“And? I still get way more likes than you,” George jokes as Dream sets the puck back on the table, lazily hitting it to George.

“Do you want to test that?” Dream responds.

George presses his lips together. “No.”

“Exactly. How many likes do you get on average?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m right.” Dream passes the puck back and George’s brown eyes follow it as it zigzags to him.

“I mean, if you’re right, then I don’t need to tell you anything.”

“Well...I just want to hear you say that I am.”

George scoffs as his response, but his friend knew better than to give into Dream’s cockiness. So instead, George hits the puck as hard as he can and they play in a comfortable silence as they listen to the faint music above them and the clinking of glasses behind the bar. There weren’t a lot of people there and after a long afternoon of being under Isla’s prying eyes, Dream was glad to cool it with the whole acting thing.

It’s been hours since their cooking class and Dream still couldn’t shake the feeling of George’s fingertips against his jaw. It’s been *hours*. Hours since George wrapped Dream’s arms around his torso and hours since their conversation about never doing it again, but Dream’s brain was snagging on something. For some reason, despite George already moving on from the awkward class, Dream couldn’t. His mind and jaw felt numb as he tried to figure out why he felt his skin crawl when he thought about the simple move.

*He grabbed my face because that’s what the woman wanted,* Dream thought. *George told you he didn’t want to do that again, so obviously he was playing along with this whole act thing. That’s what you wanted Dream. You wanted him to play along and he did, and now what? You’re going to think about it?* Dream’s thoughts distract him and George takes the opportunity to lunge across the

table to shove the puck into the wide open slot, and the table beeps in George's victory. *I guess I am. Huh.*

"Yes!" George cheered, raising his arms in a victory pose.

"Whatever, I still beat you in mini-golf," Dream mumbles.

"I just totally owned you, Dream!"

"Sure, sure."

"Sounds like you're upset. Does someone need to call the wambulance for you? I can't believe I beat you-"

"Okay, no, you didn't! We didn't even make it to ten, the table shut off before we finished, and I *let* you get ahead of me!" Dream exclaims.

"Come on, you're just upset that I finally beat you..." George's voice trails off and Dream turns his attention to the new song playing throughout the bar, his ears pricking at the familiar guitar strumming.

Dream's eyes widen when he recognizes it. "No way," he breathes out quietly.

George stops rambling. "What? What's wrong?"

"The song!" Dream says. George pauses and listens, eyes narrowing in confusion at the unfamiliar song.

"The song...? What about it?"

"It's- I don't remember the name, but I know it," Dream explains and a smile forms on his face as he listens. It was quiet and hard to hear, but he could barely make out the lyrics and that was enough to keep him up with it. "My sister used to love this song- she would play it whenever I drove her to school and stuff and we used to, like, sing karaoke with it."

"Okay?"

Dream ignored George's dismissive tone and he ignored how his friend already turned his attention back to the air hockey table. Dream was way too busy remembering all the memories swirling around the lyrics and his cheeks hurt from his smirk.

*As if you actually were inside a saltwater room,* the speakers sang above them and Dream's back straightened.

*The Saltwater Room! That's what it's called!* Dream realized and turned back to George, who was waiting patiently for him to stop zoning out with the puck poised in front of his hand. However, Dream had a different idea.

"Wait- we'll play in a minute," Dream says and he pushes the puck away from George's hand. "Listen to this."

George's shoulders slump. "I don't want to, it's weird."

"No, no, no, just listen."

George gives in and he folds his arms as the song places, his expression bored as he watches Dream

begin to mutely mouth some of the lyrics. "Dream, what are you doing?"

*All my islands have sunk in the deep, and I can hardly relax or even oversleep,* Dream mouths to the song, reaching to George from across the table. His friend's lips tug up a bit, but George doesn't budge. "Come on, George!"

"What? I'm not doing anything!"

"That's the problem! This song is a bop and you don't want to admit it," Dream says. George shakes his head.

"Not really," his friend answers stubbornly. Dream rolls his eyes and moves around the table, still reaching out for George. "Seriously, what are you doing?"

"I'm showing you how to have fun, Georgie!" Dream plucks the orange shooter out of George's hand and places it on the table and he yanks George's hand, pulling him away from the air hockey table.

*We'll turn off all the lights and set this ballroom aglow.*

"Time together isn't ever quite enough," Dream sings lightheartedly, making his voice go as high as he could make it, and that was enough to get a small smile out of George. "*When you and I are alone, I've never felt so at home!*"

"Oh my God, shut up, Dream," George mumbles and he shoves Dream away from him. "I'm getting secondhand embarrassment!"

"What will it take to make or break this hint of love?" Dream sings over him. Finally, George lets his grin loose and he rolls his brown eyes at Dream.

"Oh, I get it. Because we're 'dating,' right?" George pieces together. "You're serenading me?" That makes a laugh interrupt Dream's playful singing and grabs George's hand, tugging him close and then pushing him away as the singers on the radio sing back and forth. "You're such an idiot. Can we play air hockey now?"

"The song isn't over!"

*When we're apart whatever are you thinking of?*

Dream circles around George, his friend covering his face in embarrassment, but Dream didn't care. He liked seeing George laugh at their awkward situation instead of hiding from it and he especially liked the fact that he was the one causing George to laugh like that. The lyrics flow off of his tongue like second nature, but his eyes take their time to search over George's sharp features that were illuminated by the bright lights of the hockey table. George cracks his fingers open a bit to look back at a staring Dream, and for the first time, the eye contact made Dream's heart lurch in his chest and beat a bit faster. Dream didn't look away though. Neither did George.

*So tell me, darling, do you wish we'd fall in love?*

Dream's voice lowers to a quiet one as the song comes to an end, still gazing at George.

*All the time, all the time.*

song mentioned:

the saltwater room- owl city

this song was the whole inspiration for this story and its so cheesy and so sweet, it reminded me of george and dream and it felt like a crime to not include it in here.

June 15

10:56 a.m

“It’s raining.”

Dream’s eyes open at George’s voice and it takes his vision a moment to focus on George’s slender figure in the balcony doorway, a hand pressed against the glass. The room was dark, and sure enough, Dream could hear the gentle patter of rain outside. He stretches his arms above his head before letting them flop down to the mattresses with a heavy thud.

George tilts his head to look up at the gray sky. “Like... *really* raining.”

Dream’s heavy eyes drift over to him and he shamelessly stares at his distracted friend, still wondering how George managed to look so effortlessly put together even though his side of the bed was torn up like there was a bear fight.

“That’s great,” Dream finally says.

George turns to him. “No! It’s not great beca-”

“Why?”

“Can you let me finish before asking why?”

Dream sits up and tries to fix his hair. “Can you stop complaining so early in the morning?”

“It’s almost eleven.”

“Did I ask for the time?” Dream snaps and he bites his cheek when George’s mouth falls open in shock for a second. Dream sighs and mumbles a quick apology before throwing the covers off of him, ignoring how George’s eyes follow him across to the room as he grabs his t-shirt he threw on the floor last night.

“What’s your issue?” George asks. Dream turns to him in enough time to see George’s eyes trail down to the bit of skin still showing from his caught t-shirt. Dream coughs and pulls it down.

“Nothing.” *Lie.*

Dream felt weird.

He felt like that first day when you get sick. Or the day before. The day where your body feels like it’s filled with worms and you don’t feel terrible yet, but you know it’s coming. His head felt fuzzy and his heart was beating too strongly in his chest while his stomach squirmed. Any time he looked in George’s general direction, it was like that feeling was put on full blast and he felt anxious to make it through the day like this.

Luckily, George shrugs. “Okay...well, are you hungry? I was waiting for you to get up.”

“You waited?” Dream says. He feels bad for making George wait- it was almost noon and Dream had no idea how long George waited for. “You didn’t have to-”

“I don’t care, Dream. I’m asking you if you’re hungry.” The mention of food and eating with George makes him sick even though he’s done it a million times.

*No, I’m gonna throw up.* “Yeah...yeah, we can go grab something. I’m sure Isla is probably hunting for us, right?”

At the mention of Isla, George’s face turns sour and he lets out a small groan at the possibility of having to deal with her again. Dream laughs but it sounds forced and he hates himself for feeling so awkward around George this morning, but he pushes through and makes himself stand next to his friend, his skin pricking from the shared body heat.

“I’m gonna go get ready,” George says, sparing himself from Dream’s jumpiness, and ducks into the bathroom with the door locking behind him.

Dream doesn’t move from the glass door until he hears a small rumble of thunder outside. Raindrops race down the balcony doors and couples, that were once playing in the rain, now darted inside. The ocean looked green from the storm rolling in. Everything looked green in Dream’s eyes right now.

His stomach turned and he wobbled back to the bed, pressing his face into the cool sheets, and focused on the fan blowing down on his sweaty neck. *What is my issue?*

*Did I eat something bad?* Dream remembers their way too sour Key Lime pie from yesterday and for a second, he thought it was that, but then again, George ate it too. George was fine. *Okay...well, am I sick?* He lets himself sink into the sheets and he closes his eyes again. He didn’t feel sick- just off. Weird. His throat wasn’t hurting and his nose wasn’t stuffy, so definitely not a cold. Maybe a stomach bug? *No, I would know by now if it was a bug. What the hell is happening?*

A small sigh escapes his mouth and his body grows heavy with sleep. *Maybe I’m just tired...yeah. Yeah, I’m tired. George will wake me up, right?*

Dream pulls his friend’s face in his mind and then he lets go.

?:??

*He’s wet. Why is he wet?*

*Dream’s eyes fly open at the icy water being dumped on his skin and hot air rushes into his lungs, making him gasp and cough because it felt like fire in his throat. He couldn’t see anything. All he could hear was the loud sound of heavy rain coming from somewhere in the darkness, dumping water directly onto Dream like it was a waterfall, and it made his bones hurt.*

*“It’s raining.”*

*Like a lamp was turned on from somewhere, Dream sees George appear in the darkness in front of him. His friend was sitting with his legs crossed on their white bed, still slouching down slightly in typical George fashion. His brown hair and black shirt were sticking to his skin and, unlike Dream, he looked completely unaffected by the hot air they were breathing. Dream can’t respond, so he forces himself to keep sucking in quick breaths.*

*“It’s raining, Dream,” George repeats. His voice is echoing like he was far away.*

*“You’re right here, though?” Dream thought out loud, surprised to hear his voice come out strong*



*despite his coughing.*

*“Good observation.”*

*Dream rolls his eyes. Nice to see that even in a dream, George is just as annoying.*

*“Do you like the rain?” George asks, moving on from his comment. Dream tries to look up to the sky, but his neck feels like it's seconds away from breaking.*

*“It's cold,” Dream responds.*

*“Duh. It's rainwater.”*

*“Thanks, George. I didn't know that.”*

*“Don't you want to know why it's raining in our room?”*

*Dream looks back at him. “What? What do you mean 'our room?' You mean the hotel room?”*

*“No. Our room.”*

*The blackness around them melts like wax and reveals a tiny room- one completely different than the fancy resort one Dream fell asleep in. This one was bland. It had two desks with computers sitting side by side and Dream could see George's headphones resting on top of one of the keyboards.*

*“What?” Dream says dumbly. The sheets and blankets tug underneath him and he watches in shock as George's sheets replace the ones he was sitting on, and Dream's dull green pillow fell in his lap.*

*“Our room. It's what you wanted, right?” George asks, still unbothered with everything.*

*“No? I don't...what? What are you talking about?”*

*“It feels like rain.”*

*“What does?”*

*“Not like this rain. This rain is...different from mine,” George says, ignoring his question. “Yours is heavier-” Brown eyes meet his, “-desperate, even...if we want to get deep.”*

*“Way to be vague, George,” Dream quips.*

*“It's a dream. If you want answers, make them up yourself.”*

*Dream looks around the strange room with his and George's belongings. “...No.”*

*George smiles and before Dream realizes what's happening, George cradles Dream's cheek in his hand, swiping at the water collecting on his skin. “Don't be an idiot.”*

*“Idiot?” Dream echos. George begins to fade slightly, turning into a ghost in front of his eyes. Dream feels a foreign feeling kick into his heart and he lifts his hand to George's, pressing his friend's palm to his cheek so George doesn't let go. George's hands are warm against his cold skin. “George. George- wait- don't go, don't leave me-”*

*“Idiot.”*

*“Please don’t-” Dream starts to say, but George disappears in front of him and Dream is left pressing his own hand to his cheek where George’s was. Dream sighs. “...go...” He finishes almost silently.*

“Idiot!”

Dream’s eyes fly open and he shoots up, hands balling the white sheets on either side of him, and his heart was pounding so hard- he could see it in his eyes. It takes him a minute to figure out that George was talking to him, a pillow hugged in his arms.

“You fell asleep again, dumbass! I was yelling in your ear for, like, ten years!” George says, whacking Dream in the face with the pillow. Dream blinks, still not done processing what happened, and he looks around the hotel room. No desks, no headphones, no George sheets- no anything.

“Sorry,” Dream says finally. He didn’t feel any better. Now he just felt cold.

“Can we please go eat now? We missed breakfast- we’re gonna have to eat mac and cheese instead of cereal.”

Dream nods and he slides out of bed, making a hasty retreat to the bathroom to get away from George, and when the door shuts behind him, he falls back against the sink. His heart was still beating like crazy and his head felt even more scrambled. The hairs on his arm raised at the phantom raindrops sliding down his skin. *What the fuck?*

He turns to see himself in the mirror, looking deep into his green eyes. What the hell did George mean by ‘you wanted this?’ What did he want? Dream didn’t know and staring at himself wasn’t giving him any answers except that he was here and he was real. He could feel the wet sink edges from when George used it. Dream’s hair was a bird’s nest and his eyes were clearer than day- so he definitely wasn’t sick. It was just a completely fucked up fever dream that made him feel even weirder. Dream wasn’t a dream-reader type person, but his fingers itched to google what the hell rain meant in dreams and why George’s dream touch still lingered on his face. Oh, yeah- and he wanted to look up what sharing a room meant.

Dream splashes water on his face to clear his mind. When he looks up, he sees a soaked George standing behind him with a shell in his loose grip- and Dream’s heart practically stops beating at the sight of his friend. He whips around, flinging water onto the mirror, but no ones there. He’s left panting with a dry mouth, staring at George’s damp shower towel from the night before. *What the extra fuck?*

This was getting out of hand. Even though a storm was already here, Dream can feel another one brewing and it was right under his skin. He didn’t have a name for it and he wasn’t sure if he ever wanted the storm to get here because that meant he *had* to give it one. All he knew is that the dream broke something loose in his brain and it made his head hurt as he stepped out of the bathroom. George was standing back at the doors, watching the sky.

“It’s still raining,” his friend mumbles. Dream stands next to him and wonders if George’s hands are warm.

“I don’t think it’s gonna stop,” Dream responds.

Dream feels worse when George nods.

11:30 a.m

“It’s raining!”

Dream winces at both the words and Isla’s shrill voice as it stabs into his headache, but he pops a fry into his mouth and turns to her.

“It is,” Dream responds.

Isla stands at their table and looks around for George. “Where’s your sweetheart, darlin’?”

*He booked it when he saw you coming.* “He needed to use the bathroom.”

“Ah, well, I just have some slight schedule adjustments for y’all- so sorry ‘bout it, by the way,” she starts and she places her clipboard down the table. “Did you get enough sleep last night?”

“Um...yeah. Enough.”

“Good because you’re gonna need tons of energy for today!”

“...Great!” Dream says after a beat of silence. It already felt wrong enough to eat fries as breakfast, but he had a feeling whatever she planned was going to feel a lot worse than the sticky ketchup in his mouth. Dream can see George walk, very slowly, back to the table. For a second, they have a silent conversation with each other, and Dream feels something bubble in his chest.

“George! How’d ya sleep?” Isla asks once he takes a seat.

“Good, I guess.”

“Great!” She slams down a brochure in front of them and grins. “Have y’all ever been to a lighthouse?”

“We’ve never been to a place that lets us eat peacefully,” George mumbles and Dream kicks him under the table. Isla’s face falls for a second, but her smile quickly returns.

“I think y’all are gonna like this- it’s a very boyish activity! It’s limited, but I managed to snag you boys a spot on the tour. I felt bad about yesterday and putting y’all in that cooking class,” Isla explains. Dream and George exchange a look because they were people who preferred to focus on games and competition, not tours on lighthouses. George flips the brochure over and his eyebrows raise.

“A hundred feet tall?” George says, reading the paper. Isla nods excitedly.

“Yes! Y’all get to go in it and stuff and find out what life was like as a lighthouse keeper. I thought it might be right up your alley after I put you through those mini-golfing pictures and cooking classes. A little more casual and I won’t be there, so you’ll get total peace. No photoshoots today unless y’all take some pictures- just a totally normal day. Except for tonight.”

“What’s tonight?” George asks.

“Interview night! I told Dream about it before y’all came.”

Their attention goes to Dream who was still caught on the fact that, one, Isla caught on that they didn’t like photoshoots or her- and that was bad- and two, that little fact George spit out before Isla went on her ramble made Dream freeze. “Wait- one hundred feet?” He says, turning to George.

George's eyes squint before it clicks in his mind. "Oooh, you don't like heights."

"You don't?" Isla says and her face drops like someone kicked her dog. "Oh my goodness, honey, I am so sorry- you did mention that you wanted to leave this out of your activity list! I completely forgot!"

"List?" George says and Dream wants to disappear. "Dream, you got to choose what we do?"

"Did he not tell you that?" Isla asks. Dream shakes his head and her mouth drops slightly, reading the new tension brewing between them. Wanting to leave, but being unable to until they give her an answer, Isla awkwardly picks her clipboard back up and shifts on her heels. "Well...Dream, it's up to you. I can, um, find you...something else...you know- I'm just gonna be right back real quick!"

Isla gets out of there and leaves George staring at Dream, waiting for an explanation.

"Well?" George says.

"Well, I mean, I guess we're going to the lighthouse," Dream says.

George's dry expression doesn't change. "No."

"What? George, you look like you wanted to do this."

"I do- it's better than the cooking class you made us do yesterday," George starts, "but you're scared of heights and we're not doing something if you're not gonna like it."

"I'm not scared of heights."

"Sure, whatever. You're *'uncomfortable'* with heights," George does air quotes around the word, "but that's besides the point."

"I don't care, George, we can do the lighthouse."

"Fine, we will, but only because I'm mad that you got to pick the activities without me," George says.

"Because you didn't know that I signed you up for this!"

"It's payback then."

"What?" Dream sits up straight. "It's not payback for anything."

"It's totally payback. You're just mad that you have to deal with it."

"Okay, that's not true!"

"Yes, it is! Oh my God, Dream, you would be laughing at me!"

"That's not fair because I'm always laughing at you."

"You're an idiot."

*Don't be an idiot.* George's dream voice bounces in Dream's head and sends a searing pain through his temples, making him press his palms into his eyes and put his forehead down on the table.

“Dream?” George asks. Dream can hear a hint of concern in his voice.

Dream doesn’t want George asking him questions, so he bounces his shoulders lightly to act like he was crying. “You’re so mean, George!”

“Oh my God- get over it! She’s coming back.”

Dream peeks through his fingers to see relief in George’s eyes that he was fine and he sits back up just as Isla shuffles her way back.

“Y’all...good?” She says.

“We’ll go,” George says to her. A surprised grin appears on her face and she claps her hands once, already rattling off details and something about a quick drive from the resort to the lighthouse. Dream tries to focus on what she was saying, but he feels George’s foot leaning against his under the table, and that was enough to pull his attention away. Such a simple, friendly gesture made Dream’s brain shut down. He sneaks a glance at his friend.

George looked just as tired as Dream did, but there was something different about him. He seemed more...open today. Dream dared to say readable, even. George was tired, but he was acting in front of Isla- mindlessly resting his hand on top of Dream’s on the table which made Dream’s vision go white for a second. The worms in his body wiggled harder.

*He’s, like, happy,* Dream thought still watching George talk with Isla about where to meet. *George seems like he knows what he’s doing.*

“Wait, so how long have y’all been dating, again?” Isla asks suddenly.

“Three years,” George says a little too confidently and Dream’s heart sank in fear. *Nevermind. Nope. Nevermind- he has no idea what the fuck he’s doing-*

“He means two,” Dream rushes to correct. That was one of the questions that Dream had to answer for the background information part about him and George. Isla’s eyes still have a hint of confusion in them but she nods slowly, not taking her eyes off of George.

George’s head whips to Dream, a faint blush on his cheeks from his fuck up. “Yeah, two, sorry. It’s just...”

Dream tries to step in to save it. “We’ve been in love for so long, it feels longer!”

But at the same time, George says: “We’re coming up on our three year anniversary!”

They turn to look at each other with matching panic and George’s fingers dig into the top of Dream’s hand in fear. Isla’s eyes narrow- an expression completely different from her usual bubblyness.

“I’m sorry?” She says. “What was that? Y’all talked at the same time.”

They look at each other, then back at Isla, and Dream gives a forced laugh. “Don’t listen to him! He’s *terrible* with...with time and stuff.”

George looks like he doesn’t want to agree. “Yeah,” he says begrudgingly.

“So...you have an anniversary coming up?” Isla asks. *You really picked up on that one, didn’t you?*

“Yes,” Dream agrees. It would seem even worse if he disagreed because why would George get their own anniversary wrong?

The smile returns to her face. “That’s adorable! Y’all got anything planned? Some big fancy Youtube date?”

“Haha! No,” George says.

“This is it,” Dream adds, “just us hanging here.”

“Hanging out on the beach...together...because we’re dating,” George finishes and they awkwardly hold hands across the table, arms too stiff and fingers tangled rather than intertwined. Isla eats it up, though, and she presses a palm over her heart.

“Amazing. Anyway, have fun today! Don’t slip on the stairs and don’t look down, Dream!” She says. They say goodbyes and as soon as she leaves the dining hall, all the tension leaves their bodies and Dream practically collapses onto the table. George actually does and he put his head down in his arms.

“Holy shit,” his friend mumbles. Dream knew the anxiety must’ve gotten to him because George rarely curses like that. Dream laughs at the word and at their close call. George’s head snaps up. “What? What are you laughing at?”

“We- we almost...” he says through giggles, trying to keep down his laughter. “We almost just exposed ourselves over our anniversary.”

A dopey grin brightens George’s eyes as Dream laughs harder at the irony- of course, Isla would ask that question to George. Why wouldn’t she? But it made Dream giddy. His insides jumped at the thought of George trying, and failing, to make an effort to play along, and Dream felt a swell of relief that George was warming up.

He could feel George watch him as he laughed and Dream found himself covering his face with his hands, fighting an embarrassed blush under his friend’s gaze and he didn’t even know why. They’ve been best friends for years now and George has seen and heard all sorts of laughter from Dream.

Dream was too busy swallowing his chuckles that he didn’t even realize George still had his hand over his until he felt the warmth leave his knuckles.

His insides jump again and George starts to laugh with him.

**12:45 p.m**

“Aw, man! It’s raining.”

Dream turns his head to the woman climbing into the van with her husband in tow, their rain jackets dropping water onto the leather seats. George presses against Dream as the couple climbs their way into the back. So far, as far as Dream knew, there were only six people allowed to go see the lighthouse per tour. The place was abandoned and rickety and it was more of a safety thing than a space thing. Three pairs of couples, six people, one lighthouse and tour guide, and one van. It was cramped and did not help Dream’s jumpiness.

George stays leaned up against Dream as they wait for the last couple to crawl in the back, and

right away, Dream knew they were going to be dust compared to everyone else. Dream was already feeling pricks of jealousy under his skin from the couple in front of him (It happens to be the old couple from the cooking class yesterday. Small resort.) and the new couple was clearly still in their honeymoon stage.

“Hey,” the old woman in front of them suddenly twists around to look at them. The red flower in her hair was still bright. “You were in the cooking class correct?”

Dream notes the Italian accent in her words. “Yeah?”

“You put that woman in her place yesterday. It was hilarious! My husband and I laughed so hard after,” she says with a gentle smile and Dream can’t help but smile back. She turns back around and her husband fixes her flower again. Dream’s smile drops.

George nudges him. “Look...”

Dream’s eyes linger on the man’s gentle touch for a second longer before looking down at George’s phone. It showed a picture of a rough-looking lighthouse with bricks orange from age-the red and white paint chipping off of them. The glass bulb was murky and covered with dirt. It looked terrible.

George didn’t seem to mind though. “It’s 105 feet tall and has over two hundred stairs in it,” he says, scrolling down the page a bit. Dream leans in closer until he can smell hotel soap on George’s hair. “It was built in 1930, but became abandoned after the keeper fell from the top.”

“Shut up- that’s not what it says,” Dream scoffs and he pulls George’s hand so his phone was in front of Dream. He scans the article, his grip softening on his friend’s hand. “It says it was abandoned because they built it too far inland, idiot.”

“My story sounds better,” George says.

“Not really.”

“Why? Is it because it feeds into your fear of heights?”

“I’m not scared of heights, George.”

“You scared you’ll fall?”

“I mean, yeah. I think anyone would be-”

“Oooo, Dreamie’s scared!” George teases and he pokes at Dream’s cheek. The van pulls away from the resort, sealing their fate to go to some sketchy, old lighthouse.

“Oh, come on. You would be scared to fall from that height too.”

“Mm, no,” George answers. “But, you admit it?”

“Admit what?”

“You just said that I would be scared too, meaning that you’re scared.”

“Oh my God, I’m not scared. You’re reading into it too much.”

“I think I’m reading into it a perfect amount.”

Dream rolls his eyes and turns to the window. He watches a raindrop race by his eyes. “Hey, have you ever had a dream with rain in it?”

All the playfulness leaves George’s eyes. “What?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Um...I dunno. Like, once or twice?”

“What happened in them?” Dream asks. When George doesn’t answer, he looks back to his friend, who was already waiting for his gaze with curious eyes.

“Why do you want to know?” George urges.

“Why can’t you just answer the question?”

“Why can’t you answer mine?”

“You answer mine first because I asked first.”

George takes a deep breath and looks out the window, way out past Dream’s face. “I don’t really remember. They happened months ago.”

“What do you remember?”

“...I just remember it being rainy and cold. I mean, dreams don’t have meaning so I didn’t really care.”

*Rainy and cold.* The words cause Dream’s heart rate to spike.

“Right, yeah,” Dream says. He turns away. “They don’t mean anything.”

“Why did you want to know?”

Dream shakes his head, watching two raindrops race towards each other and merge into one giant drop.

“Just curious, I guess.”

### **1:30 p.m**

“It’s still raining?!”

Dream’s ears turn warm at the tour guide’s words, but he was way too busy staring up at the absolute monster of a lighthouse in front of him. It was far from being the tallest lighthouse in the world- America, even- but just looking at the rusted railing above him made his knees lock up. Nerves made him paralyzed as cold rain hit his unblinking face and thundered in his ears as it pelted the plastic hood of his rain poncho. The lighthouse staff was being way too nice to Dream and George- shoving these plastic jackets into their arms as soon as they realized they showed up in sweatshirts and shorts. They even gave George a waterproof brochure of all the lighthouses in the Florida state and a light-up lighthouse keychain.

So naturally, George was perfectly fine with being here.



Dream, however, wanted to lean against the slimy bricks of the tower and die.

"I thought for sure the rain would have stopped by now," the tour guide says, holding her palm out to catch the drops. "Or at least lighten up," she adds quietly.

They've been on this stupid tour for a solid hour and it's been pretty boring. Nothing but walking from point A to point B and rambling about the 'fascinating' life of a lighthouse keeper and looking at all the artifacts they found here. Dream's feet hurt and his socks and sandals were wet and muddy. His sweatshirt was uncomfortably damp. His head still hurt. Dream was exhausted and bored, but George seemed to be into the tour. At least Dream thought he was- his friend was nodding along slightly with the tour guide's facts and taking his sweet, sweet time reading over each informational panel on the wall. Every time he paused, Dream would stomp at the dirt in the floorboards and make sharp comments at George to hurry up so they wouldn't get left behind, but for some reason, Dream would always wait. Dream would always stand a few feet ahead of George and look at the cracks on the ceiling until he felt George's arm brush by his.

"Does that mean we won't be able to climb?" The young woman asks. The tour guide presses her lips together in thought.

"Usually, no, we wouldn't be able to. For safety purposes and all," Dream lets out a relieved sigh at her answer, but the tour guide then finishes with, "but since we have such a small group and everyone listened- we'll go up."

*What are we? Five?* Was Dream's first thought, but then as everyone started to move towards the shelter of the tower, Dream's second thought was: *Oh fuck.*

His blood turned into slush in his veins as he forced his legs to follow George into the building, ducking under the short door frame. No one else looked bothered about this. Actually, Dream was the only person here who hung out in the back of the group with his fingernails biting into his palms in his sweatshirt pocket.

"Dream," George says, turning to him. His friend's poncho crinkles loudly in the heavy air.

"Hm?"

"You sure you're good?"

Dream swallows and looks up to the spiraling staircase- which was made of *metal* , may Dream add- and he feels his head get dizzy for a second. "Um..."

"We can stay down here if you want, I don't care," George offers. Dream looks down at him and he could tell that George was lying through his teeth right now. This whole time, George has looked nothing but hooked with the weird life of a lighthouse keeper, and for a split second, Dream opens his mouth to ask if they could stay down here.

*You got to choose what we do?*

That's when Dream snaps his jaw shut and bites his tongue. This was George's vacation too and so far he's had barely any say in what they did. Dream still felt the lingering guilt of forcing his friend into this uncomfortable situation. So swallowing the anxiety balling in his throat, he shakes his head.

"No...no, it's okay, we can go up," Dream responds finally.

"You hesitated. Why'd it take you so long to respond?" George asks.

"I was weighing my options carefully."

"It was a yes or no choice."

"And I gave my answer, so go-" Dream says, giving George a shove to the staircase where everyone was already starting to hike up. "Before I change my mind."

George walks up the first few steps and Dream stays rooted where he was in the center of the bottom floor, watching George's back. His friend stops.

George's brown eyes meet his and there's something soft and glowing in them. "Are you coming?" He asks softly. Dream can see a raindrop run down the side of George's plastic hood.

Everyone's footsteps echo in the hollow tower, but the concrete and bricks suck all the noise out, and Dream can hear George clearly just like his friend was still standing in front of him. Dream focuses on his own soft footsteps as he walks slowly to the flakey railing of the stairs, ignoring how his skin crawled and burned under George's patient gaze. Dream's sandals squeak on the metal that was wet from a leak somewhere in the ceiling, but he takes measured steps to make sure he didn't slip. George didn't start to walk until they were on the same stair and as they walked up, Dream's hand shaking slightly as they went higher, George bumps their elbows together.

"Stop looking down," George commands.

"I'm not."

"Dream, your neck is practically broken from how long you've been staring at the ground. Just look up."

*Why are the stair edges so sharp- these things could pry my kneecaps off if I slipped, Dream thought. His mind was racing and he made sure to step exactly in the middle of the stair. And the gaps between each step are so big...were these people trying to fall? What if George was right? What if someone died here by falling and that's why they had to abandon this shitty place and they just used the inland excuse as a cover-up and-*

"Up, Dream. Look up."

George's voice yanks him out of his panicked thoughts and Dream stops walking completely. They were at another turn in the staircase and there was a dusty window in front of him, giving him a bird's-eye view at the wet grass thousands of inches below them. Dream can see the gray Atlantic peeking over the horizon and his grip tightens on the railing. He feels a piece of paint chip into his palm. *High. We are so high right now.*

George doesn't realize Dream stopped until he was at the next turn. "Dream?" He calls down. "What are you doing?"

"I don't like this," Dream admits, still looking out the window. *If I keep looking at the window, I won't have to go higher.* He can hear George's gentle footsteps squeaking on the stairs and he can see George appear in the corner of his eye.

"I told you we could've stayed down there," George says.

"Everything alright?" The tour guide shouts down at them. George looks at Dream like he was going to respond, but Dream was too busy freaking out from the dizzying fall below him and the rush of embarrassment hitting his body.

George sighs. “Yeah, we’re fine!” He calls up to her before he turns to Dream. “Dream, come on. They wouldn’t let us up if it was unsafe, right?”

“Yeah,” Dream says dryly.

“Okay, so...walk.”

A stair creaks somewhere above him and sends a jolt of new panic in his tight muscles. “No.”

George stares at him for a second, trying to figure out what to do. George steps in front of the window so Dream is forced to stare at him and although George’s tone was harsh, he looked worried. “We’re almost there, I promise. It’s just a few more turns.”

“And...and then what? There’s th-that balcony, right? That we have to go on?”

“You can stay inside where the light is.”

An image of himself standing in front of the light as he watches George fall through the unreliable railing flashes behind his eyes and he shakes his head quickly. *No way. Not happening.*

“Well, then I don’t know what to do!” George cries, throwing his hands up.

George looks around the tower like the answer was going to appear on the rotting walls and he can see something settle in George’s mind, but Dream didn’t know what. At least, he didn’t know what until George suddenly thrusts his hand out to Dream and he gives a weak smile.

“Close your eyes.”

Dream blinks at the hand, then at George. “What?”

“Trust me. Take my hand and close your eyes.”

Dream lifts his hand to take George’s but he pauses. He and George have held hands so many times before, but something about this time made Dream’s heart jump a bit. Maybe it was because George made the move? Maybe it was his anxiety peaking? But either way, Dream places his hand in George’s and his fingers stop trembling as George wraps a strong grip around them. Dream closes his eyes as George gently guides him, whispering when to step and counting down how many steps they had left.

Dream’s other hand eventually slipped off the railing. George’s warm hand made heat crawl up his arm and to his damp chest. George never went in front of Dream or walked behind him. George stayed on the same sharp metal step as Dream the entire time they finished their hike up and when George’s hand lets go of Dream’s- Dream opens his eyes.

Any ounce of fear flew out of Dream as he looked out over the marsh where the lighthouse sat. The ocean was still gray, but it bled into a mix of yellows and greens as the marsh grass swayed in the wind and Dream could smell and taste the salt. George and Dream weren’t outside yet, but Dream could feel some icy raindrops blow into the light’s room.

“I’m gonna go out,” George says and he starts to walk away, but Dream’s arm shoots out and he grabs George’s forearm.

“Thanks for that,” Dream mumbles.

George smiles at him like Dream just complimented his coding skills. “Don’t worry about it.”

Dream watches George through the glass as his friend holds onto his plastic hood, fighting the frigid wind up here, and George's eyes scan the marsh. Dream can see George occasionally turn around to look at him like he was making sure Dream was still here.

*Cute*, Dream laughed at the thought. George was cute.

Dream wanted to talk to George.

His heart starts to pound again as he steps out onto the balcony. His hand wipes at the gathering raindrops on the painted surface of the light room as he carefully makes his way to his friend. The balcony was small. Thin and grated so Dream could stare down directly at the grass beneath him. Dream forces his chin up to the sky when he feels the dizziness sink into his vision again.

"You're out here?" George sounded surprised.

"For a little bit, I guess."

"I'm surprised!"

*Knew it*. "I told you I'm not scared of heights."

"Okay, Dream, and this lighthouse is yellow," George jokes and Dream takes a second to eye the dull red of the old lighthouse.

"Oh, I get it. It's a colorblind joke."

"You're a genius, Dream."

"Whatever. I am *not* scared of heights," Dream says pointedly and George gives him a deadpan look. "What? Why are you looking at me like-"

George shoves at his shoulder and even though all it did was make Dream tilt back a bit, Dream's hands desperately grab at the railing and he takes stumbling steps back until his back hits the tower behind him. George bursts out laughing and covers his mouth with his hand.

"That's not funny!" Dream shouts, drawing the attention of the other couples.

"Your face, Dream! You should've seen your face!" George laughs, resting an elbow on the railing. "It was like-" he makes an exaggerated horrified face and as much as Dream wanted to be mad, he had to fight a grin.

"No way I looked like that."

"You totally did!"

Dream relaxes against the wall and takes a cautious step towards George. "Don't push me."

"I won't, I won't."

Dream delicately rests his folded arms on the railing and the two stand in silence for a second, looking out at the low-flying heron in the marsh. For the first time that day, Dream liked the feel of the rain. He liked the way the drops landed on his arms through the thin plastic of the poncho. He liked how they drowned out the new thoughts rising in his head and he liked how they bit at his skin- like the little kisses his mom used to pepper all over his face. Dream liked how refreshed he felt and how happy the earth and sea looked with the storm. The green grass always looked healthier and the blue ocean always looked calmer after the rain passed.

"I'm tired," George says. "I want to go home."

"Home as in resort or home as in England?"

George doesn't respond for a second and Dream lets him think because Dream was right there with him. He didn't want to go *home* home yet, but the resort wasn't his home either.

"I dunno," George answers.

Dream nods like George made a definite answer. "Yeah, I get it."

Dream sees George stiffen for a second, almost like he was hyping himself up to ask something, but then his shoulders deflate and he goes back to looking. Dream feels George slide towards him slightly until there was no space between their arms and Dream didn't move. He didn't even bat an eye as George relaxed against him slightly so Dream could feel George's gentle weight on his shoulder. Dream just stands and keeps on looking up and out at the marsh, letting the rain fall on him just like it did in his dream.

### 1:58 p.m

The walk back down was a lot easier since Dream had the comfort of watching the ground get closer instead of further away. George still stayed glued to his side just in case Dream froze up again, but Dream was way too humiliated already to let himself do that *twice* in one trip.

Dream elbows George in the ribs as they reach the last few steps. "Watch this."

He launches himself from the step they were on and his sandals hit the concrete with a thundering slam. Once he gets his balance, he turns around and grins at George.

"Wait- I'm gonna do it backwards," George says and he turns around. Dream's grin falls.

"Okay, wait a second-"

"Ready? Three, two-"

"George, I don't think that's a good-"

"*Three!*"

George leaps backward off of the stair and although it was, like, the fifth step from the bottom and George was going to make it just fine, Dream's muscles tense up and he lunges to try to meet George at the bottom. When his friend hits the ground, he lands right on Dream's sandals and he stumbles back. George's arms pinwheel, reaching for something to grab, and his back slams against Dream's chest and his head clocks against Dream's chin. George's hands grab a fistful of Dream's poncho.

For a few seconds, they stand there like that. George pressed against Dream's chest and grabbing the hood of his poncho, and Dream's arms wrapped around George's torso to secure his balance on top of his feet. Dream can feel George's racing heart in his chest and he pushes George to his feet.

"Yeah...that's why we *don't* do that," the tour guide says with a tight smile. Dream and George look back at her, both fighting smiles and giggles. She focuses on George. "You're lucky your boyfriend was there to save that. You would've been the second person to die here on these stairs."

Dream and George's smiles and laughter die quickly.

"Second person?" George asks.

At the same time, Dream says, "Boyfriend?"

*Well, duh, yeah,* Dream realized and George saves them by nodding at the tour guide like he was confirming it. *Don't be an idiot, Clay.*

*Don't be an idiot.*

*Don't be an idiot.*

### **2:15 p.m**

"I'm so *tired*," Dream says as he sinks into the seat of the van. George was messing around on Twitter next to him with a tiny gift shop bag under his elbow. They were waiting on the older couple to finish up in the gift shop before they could head back to the resort.

"Me too," George agrees.

"I might sleep on the way back."

"It's, like, a fifteen minute drive, though?"

Dream gives George a side-eye. "It's called a nap. It's when you don't sleep for fourteen hours straight."

"A naah-puh?" George sounds out like the word was foreign to him. Dream rolls his eyes and flicks George's forehead.

"You're so dumb. Shut up and eat your veggie straws."

George shrugs and pops a straw in his mouth, holding the bag out to Dream. Dream takes one and like their minds were connected, they point at each other and blow at each other's faces through the straws. George laughs and ducks away, biting on his straw with a crunch.

Eventually, when they do finally leave, the long road back stretches in front of them and Dream feels his eyes get heavy. *Note to self: kick George out of the bed and have him sleep on the floor. Again...*

"Hey," George says and Dream feels something small get pressed into his palm. Dream looks down to an earbud and he watches as George scrolls through his Spotify playlist, tapping at songs until finally settling on a gentle instrumental song. Dream doesn't complain since it was nice to listen to a song other than steel drums, reggae, Mario Kart music ripoffs, and cheesy love songs. After three days, those things start to get to you.

The van was quiet. Nothing but the outside world of cars running through puddles kept Dream company as he forced his eyes open and focused on keeping track of what color each car that passed them was. *Red, red, red, white, red, blue, blue, gray, red, red....*

"You can sleep, I'll wake you up when we get there," George whispers. Dream shakes his head because he totally *wasn't* going to fall asleep. George was right- it's a fifteen minute drive and a nap in a musty van won't do anything. Yet, Dream settled his temple against the window and

closed his eyes- but only for a second- just because they were dry.

When Dream opened them, his neck was stiff and his eyes felt like sand was rubbed into them, but he peels himself away from the window. He feels something slide off of his shoulder and he looks over to see George suddenly stretching and rubbing his eyes, looking at the resort's entrance to their left.

"Oh, sorry, were you-" Dream starts.

"No. No, I wasn't, I was just about to wake you," George responds in a rush, not meeting Dream's eyes. He can see the pink on George's cheeks, though, but he lets it slide. Not the place or time to poke at George.

The two boys sprint through the falling rain with arms shielding their faces and clothes sticking to their already chilled skin. Once they enter the lobby, shivering and wet with rain sliding down their cheeks, Isla spots them from her corner in the reception area and she beams at them.

"I see y'all had some fun!" She calls. "How'd you do, Dream? Did you conquer your fear?"

*You had to yell it.* "Sure did!" He lies, pretending like he didn't need his hand held to make it up to the top.

"What about you, George? Any fears you defeated?" She starts to come around her desk and George pushes Dream in the direction of their room.

"I'm not scared of anything!" George answers.

Before Isla could meet them, they make a beeline to the elevators and dip into one as soon as the doors slide open, and Dream sinks against the mirrored walls in relief. *My brain couldn't handle a conversation with her right now.*

He slams a fist on their floor's button and he stares at George through the mirrors, trying to figure out if they should sleep or force themselves to do another activity to keep up with their unlimited passes here. Dream takes one look at George, whose head was bowed, and he decided that they should probably recharge a bit. Last night must've been a rough night for George too.

*Did you fall asleep in the van too?* Dream wanted to ask as he stared. Dream remembers feeling something roll off his shoulder and his face gets hot. *You did, didn't you? You fell asleep on...on me.*

The realization makes something in Dream's chest tingle a bit and he physically pulls at his hoodie like the feeling was a bug or something on his clothes. The doors beep at them and George's head rolls up, making Dream yank his eyes away and walk quickly to their room. He already had their room key out between his fingers and in one swift swipe, he unlocks the door and shoves it open, walking in to create distance between him and George.

All day today, they've been close. So close. Too close. Dream is surprised George hasn't said anything or made some new rule like 'No breathing in the same direction.'

"So..." Dream forces out. "What do you want to do?" George sits on the bed and turns around to give him a tired look. "Right...right. Sleep."

George flops down with his back to Dream and Dream stands there, watching George's body swell and deflate with each breath before joining George. He laid on the very edge on his side and he could feel how burnout he was already, but he couldn't fall asleep. His eyes were darting all over

the ceiling in thought with his hands folded on his chest.

One thought kept bouncing back to him. One single thought made his brain snag as he laid there in his wet clothes next to a sleeping George.

*What are you thinking and why do I want to know so badly?*

### 5 p.m

“Knock, knock!”

Dream and George pause their channel surfing and stare at the door, both hoping that, maybe, she would take the hint and leave them alone.

“Dream? George? Helllooo?” She calls. Another beat of silence. “I know y’all are in there, I can hear the TV! Now open up, I gotta discuss something about the contract with you boys.”

At the mention of the contract, Dream rolls his eyes, but begrudgingly opens the door to her cheerful face. “Hi, Isla.”

“Hello, Dream! Sorry, did I interrupt something?” She asks, still poking her head in.

“Nah, we were just finding a movie to watch,” Dream answers and he steps back to let her in. She waves excitedly at George, who gives her a lazy wave back. Her innuendos didn’t really bother them anymore. In fact, they learned to expect comments like that from her now.

Isla hums and she picks up the mini-golf pictures on the TV stand. “I love these photos so much. Y’all just have this natural vibe to you. Truly best friends and lovers, and we *love* that here.”

“That’s great,” George deadpans. Dream gives him a *Don’t be rude* look.

“Any way!” She claps. “I just stopped by to offer you some rainy day activity ideas so you don’t,” she looks around their dirty room and the take out box between them on the bed, “um, *waste* away in here! I also just have to ask y’all a few questions about your stay and about, well, *you!*”

“Us?” Dream says, exchanging a look with George from across the room.

“Yes! You!”

Small problem: they didn’t elaborate on their relationship. This was obvious from their run-in this morning and neither of them thought to talk about it after. Neither of them brought up the fact that *maybe* they should come up with a story and go-to facts.

“Let’s start with the stay questions,” George urges, buying them time.

She leans against the TV stand with her clipboard cradled in her arms, a pen ready to scribble their bullshit answers. “Alrighty! First ‘Q’- So far, during your stay at the Moonlight Resort, what has been the general vibe of the place?”

“What?” George asks.

“Ya know! The vibe! Is it oceany, peaceful, stressful-”

“Romantic,” Dream answers mindlessly. Eyes turn to him. “It’s definitely...romantic here.”



“Would you say *The Proposal* romantic or *The Lion King* romantic?” Isla questions. Dream shrugs.

“*The Lion King*? I dunno.”

“Hm, interesting,” she scribbles something down, “moving on- what has been your favorite pastime activity?”

“Sleeping,” George answers.

They bounce back and forth with vague answers and when Isla reached the bottom of the list, she didn’t look very thrilled with their boring answers, but she kept a smile on.

“You know? You guys look very tired,” she says. Dream, who had taken a seat on the edge of the bed, feels George kick at his back. “Our resort has plenty of indoor and outdoor hot tubs! They’re nice for unwinding and getting warm after a chilly, rainy day like today.”

“What about the ‘us’ questions?” Dream says.

Isla waves her hand. “I won’t push y’all today. We have plenty of time together, so I’ll snag you boys another time.”

When she leaves, George says, “That was horrible.”

“No kidding. She has to suspect something at this point.”

George sits up and scoots so he’s sitting next to Dream. “It’s almost like someone said that this was a bad idea before.”

“You like it here, don’t pretend like you hate it,” Dream says.

“I don’t have to pretend.”

“The cooking class and lighthouse beg to differ.”

“Hm, yeah,” his friend says, “but notice how those are things *I* want to do. You made the list completely Dream-only.”

Dream winces. “Yeah, sorry. I didn’t think about that.”

“Well, today is George day, okay? And I say we go check out the hot tubs she was talking about because I’m freezing right now.”

George gets up to get changed and Dream makes a face. “Ew, ‘George Day?’ That sounds like the worst day of the year.”

“It’s actually a worldwide holiday.”

“Oh, is it now?”

George smiles at him. “Yep. Whatever George says, goes. So chop-chop, Dreamie!” George throws his hoodie at Dream’s face. “We got a hot tub date.”

**5:48 p.m**

They ended up picking the outdoor hot tubs. Why? Because apparently, on George Day, George also had to pick the fucking *atmosphere* of the activity too. They went to seven other hot tubs. *Seven*. They finally settled on this one after walking around in thin t-shirts in a place where the AC was blasting 24/7.

The hot tub was outside and the patio it sat on was covered by a straw roof with turquoise LED lights around the perimeter. The patio was misty from the heat mixing in with the cold air, but they could see the ocean from their tub and that was good enough for Dream.

The water scorched his tired skin as he sat with his head resting back against the ledge. George was on the other side, staring out in a sleepy daze at the waves. They made a rule that for the first twenty minutes, neither of them could talk since Dream was already annoyed with George for taking so long to pick a stupid hot tub and George was annoyed with Dream for trying to create a backstory for their fake relationship. So they sat in peace with gentle violins playing above them. At least Dream thought it was violins- he couldn't hear over the bubbling water.

The sun was starting to set behind them as George's phone timer went off, both of them sighing. "There goes the peace," his friend jokes, tapping it off.

"We don't have to talk still."

"Yeah...true."

Dream opens one eye and sees George waiting for him to say something. "What? Do you want to talk to me?"

"No, I was thinking about how dumb you look."

"Thank you so much, George. You're the best boyfriend ever!"

"I try."

Dream scoffs. "That's the biggest lie you've ever told."

"No, I've told bigger lies," George responds.

"Like?" Dream's curiosity is piqued.

"Not having a fear."

"Well, duh. Everyone has a fear."

"It's not something stupid like heights, though."

Dream glares and splashes a wave of hot water at George's face, making his friend's already burnt skin turn red. "You can die from heights."

"You can die from my fear too."

"I didn't ask."

"I didn't need your permission to talk," George quips back and Dream's eyebrows raise.

"Really? You act like you do when we talk to Isla."

"Someone has to clean up your damage after you speak." Dream splashes him again and George

wipes the water from his eyes, but he keeps them closed. “Stop splashing me-” Dream sends another wave into George. “I knew you were going to do that! You’re such an idiot- stop!”

“Why? So you can keep being cranky?”

“I’m not cranky!”

“Bitchy?”

George narrows his eyes. “No. Do you even want to know what my fear is?”

“Not really,” Dream responds.

“Okay, fine. Then I won’t say it.”

“Good because I don’t care,” Dream says. They go into a stare-off with one another and Dream starts to feel bad. “Okay, just say it.”

“No.”

“George, come on, don’t be like that.”

“No, it’s fine. You said you didn’t care so I’m not going to say anything.” George leans back over the hot tub to look out at the ocean. The orange sun creates a glowing dot in his dark eyes and the turquoise lights light up George’s skin in the water. Dream lets himself look for a second before snapping out of it.

“I do care!” Dream moves to him, resting an elbow on the ledge. “C’mon, now- I know you wanna tell me.”

“Let me think about it...Mm, no.”

“I’ll splash you again.”

That makes George look at him. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Do you wanna test it?”

“I’m not scared of water, Dream. There’s nothing to test.”

*Challenge accepted.*

Dream sends water up to George’s face again and again and again until giant waves slosh over the side of the tub and George can’t catch a break. Dream was sweating from the heat and there were other couples in other tubs that were giving them annoyed looks, but Dream was having way too much fun making George eat his words in the corner of the hot tub. Turquoise water splashes up and a slender hand shoots out and grabs Dream’s wrist, and George pulls himself out of the crossfire of the waves, coughing and spitting into the water.

“Ew! What the hell, George- are you *spitting?!* ” Dream laughs, shying away from the spit bubble in the water.

“You were-” George coughs. “You were drowning me!”

“I was not-” A hot wave slams into his face and burns his eyes and nose. Dream shakes his head and blinks through the water droplets on his eyelashes. “Is that all you got?”

There's a moment of stillness with George still clenching Dream's hand. Nothing but water rolls around them and Dream tries not to pant to show that he wasn't worn out from his attack. George's eyes roam down to his shoulders for a second before returning to his eyes, a small smile on his lips.

*What was that? What'd he just do?!* Dream screamed in his mind and the water becomes a hundred times hotter from the blush running across his skin, but George sees the moment Dream's defense falters, and that's when his friend attacks.

George lunges with an armful of water and swoops it into Dream's face. Dream's world goes muffled as the wave hits and his face goes numb with heat. He gasps for a breath once it passes but there's another one. A stronger wave slams into the side of his head and he's knocked against the side of the hot tub, his temple slamming onto its ledge. Dream bolts up and yanks his hand away from George's and rubs his head.

George was laughing because he thought Dream gave up. "I told you that you were drowning me! Doesn't feel good does it-" George stops, realizing Dream was rubbing his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just hit my head. I'm fine."

He feels George pull his hand away from his face and his friend looks at his temple. "Oh my God, there's nothing there! You're a baby, Dream."

"I told you I was fine, what! What do you mean I'm a baby? I literally just sat here and-"

"Why are you getting so angry?"

"Because you're too close, George!" Dream blurts and George stares at him. *All day, you've been right there next to me and your touch hurts.*

"What? What do you mean?"

"I..." Dream looks at the water. "I don't know."

"No, you do know, you're just not telling me."

"You won't even tell me your stupid fear."

"It's not stupid, Dream."

"Then what is it? Spiders? Ghosts? Snakes?" Dream asks and his hand goes limp in George's, not even caring that his friend still had a loosening grip on his wrist. "I was joking before about not caring. Of course I care."

"You do?"

Dream meets George's eyes and with each passing minute, their faces grow teal and teal from the lights above and Dream's heart pounded. Hurt ripples in Dream's chest at George's words because he did care. He always cared about George- so what did he do to make George think otherwise?

"Duh," Dream says weakly.

"Tell me what you meant and I'll tell you my fear," George tries to bargain.

*I don't know if I like you being so close. I know I shouldn't because I've never...had those feelings*

*but somethings happening and I don't know what it is. I don't know if I want to find out, if I'm being honest. I'm scared of heights and it feels like I'm falling from the tallest skyscraper in the fucking world and I can't do anything to stop myself or figure out why I fell in the first place.*

"Dream?" George prompts.

"I told you," Dream says, "I don't know."

"Then I don't know either."

Dream can see George's eyes harden. After being open all day, George's internal book snaps shut right in front of Dream. Yet, George doesn't let go of Dream's wrist and Dream doesn't make any move to pull it away again. Dream sits up straight, his temple pounding from the hit.

The moment is there.

When Dream sat up, George somehow slid closer to him and lowered their hands back into the water as the two held guarded gazes to one another. Neither of them wanted to talk, and so be it. Dream wasn't going to be the one to spill his guts and George was never the person to do so anyways. But holy *fuck*- despite George being so walled up, everything was there.

Their faces were inches apart. Dream was turned to George and George was turned to Dream. Dream, as much as he tried to fight it, felt the tingling in his chest again as Dream felt a slight tug. He could count the freckles on George's face and he could see the setting sun still glowing in George's pupils. Dream could feel George's gentle panting from the argument and splashing on his chin and Dream swallowed.

Everything was there. Lined up for Dream to just lean in- ever so slightly...

George's eyes flick down to Dream's lips.

And Dream's heart stutters in his chest.

Turquoise blinds his vision because, at that moment, Dream *wanted* to lean in.

He dips his head slightly and George's eyes widen and his friend shoots across the hot tub, climbing out faster than Dream could comprehend.

"George?" He calls, his voice dripping with dread. "George!"

George was already gone with a towel wrapped around his waist and his blue t-shirt becoming soaked against his chest.

Dream's heart pounds green into the water as his mind races and a new thought enters his mind.  
*Did he feel it too?*

His stomach flips as he climbs out, ignoring the curious looks from others, and he follows George's wet footprints off of the deck and through the lobby.

*We didn't. We didn't. We didn't. He's fine. We didn't break any rules. We didn't...we didn't, Clay. You're fine. You didn't do anything,* Dream reminds himself to ease his growing anticipation as the footprints dry up in front of their room. Dream knocks on the door.

"George?" He asks quietly. "Can I come in?"

He doesn't know why, but he's surprised when the door swings open to reveal a dressed George

with, surprise surprise, an unreadable, neutral expression.

“Careful the floors wet,” George mutters as Dream steps in. Water slides down his legs and pools beneath him.

“I’m sorry-”

“For what, Dream?” George says. “It’s fine.”

“What? George, didn’t we-”

“We...what? Almost drown each other?” George laughs. “Yeah, and then you hit your head and cried like a big baby, remember?”

*You didn’t do anything wrong. “...Right. Yeah.”*

“Exactly. Get changed, you’re making my things wet.”

Dream looks down and notices that he’s standing over George’s backpack and he shuffles into the bathroom, leaning against the sink. He doesn’t bother to close the door at first. He stands there like an ashamed toddler and thinks about how his body moved faster than his mind at that moment, and he knows. He knows something is up. It was like a puzzle piece was slowly wiggling its way into place in Dream’s mind. George clearly knew it too. Just the thought of George seeing Dream make that subtle move made Dream cringe and smack himself in the forehead. *Idiot.*

At least George was handling it well. *I think.*

At least they didn’t have to talk about it. *I think.*

Dream remembers how George looked at his lips. A move that was so quick and so noticeable that it made Dream bury his face into his hands with a furious blush on his neck and cheeks. He grabs at his hair. The memory plays again and Dream couldn’t make it stop as his mind wanders. *What if....what if, what if, what if-*

Dream had a lot to think about and even long after their shitty cable movie ended- long after their room service food was shoved in the fridge and the pillow wall was built- Dream found himself drawn to George. A flaming purple curiosity flickered in his chest and he turned his body towards George, watching his friend’s sleeping face for a better hint for what he was thinking in that turquoise water.

*Your eyes, George. I saw that. Did you feel it too? You had to. Why won’t you-*

“Talk to me,” Dream whispers. George’s eyes clench for a second, but then relax and George rolls over. *There’s something more to you.*

Dream closes his eyes, but he doesn’t sleep.

*And I think there’s something more to us.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**June 16**

**6 a.m**

*“What do you want, Dream? Don’t say me because I know that’s not true.”*

*“But I do want you?”*

*She laughed. “No. You don’t. One more time, Dream, tell me what it is you want.”*

*Your name was on my tongue. “I already told you,” I said and I moved to her to wrap her in my arms and pull her in close to my chest. It didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel natural like it did with you when we hugged at the airport for the first time. “I want you.”*

*“I don’t believe you,” she had said. And you know something?*

*I don’t think I believed myself either.*

The sand sinks beneath Dream as he walks, kicking up the saltwater and marching through the strong pull of the incoming wave as he kept his eyes down. After summers on the beach, his eyes fall back into a natural scanning motion as he looks at the pale pinks of seashells and the shiny browns of a shark tooth. Another wave hits his ankle and seafoam covers the beach treasures up.

*It’s dumb to think that, I know. You don’t have to tell me. But listen- at that moment, I didn’t understand why your name itched the back of my throat and I didn’t even think about why I was comparing you to her. You were across the ocean and she was right there. She was giving me everything I could’ve wanted, but I always felt like I was missing something. I told you about that fight. You said that I said the right thing even though I knew I didn’t because I lied.*

*I lied to her. I lied to you.*

Dream lets out a long breath and lifts his eyes to the sun peeking out over the horizon. The sun bleeds a deep gold in the clear water as it pushes back the inky color of night. Dream couldn’t sleep. Every time he shut his eyes and drifted off, he was haunted with the electrifying memory of George’s glowing eyes looking at his lips and his mind would wander down the *What if...* path.

*What if we did kiss?* Dream remembered thinking. The word made him blush like a middle schooler. *What would have you done?*

Dream’s mind would carry him through George’s warm, wet hands on his jaw and then their lips brushing. He would picture George’s fingers tangled in his hair as Dream’s hands pulled his friend in closer with teeth gnashing and fluttering touches on each other’s collarbones. Dream’s cells would pop and fizz at the thought and he knew it was dangerous to walk down that path, but God- he was curious. The moment was *there*. The further Dream went down the *What if...* path, the more his stomach curled and the more he breathlessly grabbed at the hotel sheets with sweaty hands.

So when the sun came up, Dream threw the sheets off himself, tugged on his hoodie, and marched

right out of the resort and down to the beach.

*I am so sorry, Dream apologized to George in his head.*

*“I am so sorry, Dream,” you had said to me when I gave you the news. “That sucks.”*

*“Yeah,” I breathed out, “it does.”*

*“I mean, it's her loss, right? You tried.”*

*Did I try though? Dream couldn't remember. She was great. She cared about me and she supported me in whatever I did, but...*

*“What? What do you mean you're not coming?” I said to her.*

*“Look, Dream, he's your friend, not mine. Go meet him. Go do your thing. I don't care.”*

*That was the first time she said that she didn't care about something I did. And it involved you.*

*“You don't want to meet him?” I asked.*

*She scoffed at me and ran a hand through my hair. “I would be third-wheeling. I don't wanna hold you guys back,” she had said. She then dragged a hand to my cheek and it was supposed to be comforting, but her hand was too cold. “So, go. Go pick him up. Go see him. He's here for you, after all.”*

*Did she know? Did she know before I did?*

A seagull cries above him and Dream gazes up at it, shading his eyes from the rising sun.

*Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Maybe I'm overthinking everything. I'm tired and we're stuck in a romantic place- I have to be setting myself up here.*

...

*I don't think I am.*

Dream's phone buzzes in his pocket and on the screen, George's name glows blue in his eyes as his message reads a simple, yet effective, line: ???

Dream lets out another long breath and turns on his heel, leaving a deep hole in the sand that fills with water from the next wave, and he follows his faded footprints back to the resort.

*Do you remember that night we called each other? I showed you my seashell collection and you showed me the old glow stars on the ceiling. Then when we both got tired, we put our phones on the pillow next to us and acted like we were at a sleepover. You told me to count the stars on your ceiling and I counted twenty-six. Do you remember looking at me through the phone screen when I counted? I do. I remembered focusing hard on the stars so that way, when I looked back at you, that would've been twenty-six seconds of my heart racing under your eyes. Well, also because I didn't want to mess up counting.*

*What about when your second visit to America? We met up with Sapnap and Karl, but I remember us always hanging back behind them. You would always look at me first when you said something. I liked that. I liked having you with me.*

Dream kicks up loose sand as he walks over a dune, staring up at the towering building in front of



him and he can see a few people on their balconies to watch the sun. His eyes drift to where their room should be. George wasn't there.

His feet are covered with sand as he walks back to their room and he finds the door cracked open. *Shit, did I leave it open?* Dream wondered as he quietly pushed it open, trying not to stir his friend. George was now sleeping *over* the covers and was curled up in the dead center of the bed- a completely different position than what Dream left him in. *No, I didn't. He opened the door for me.*

Not bothering to clean his feet off, he walks soundlessly across the room and he unlocks their balcony door, stepping out to see the ocean again. He stares at the sharp horizon.

*You have, what, four more days left here? Are you really going to waste it away wondering?* Dream looks back to where George slept and he remembers the promise he made to George. Although it wasn't the same feeling, Dream had a hunch that if he continued to walk down this path, it was bound to develop eventually. *He's your best friend, Clay. Let it go.*

*Just let it go now.*

### 9:30 a.m

"I *still* don't get why we have to be up this early," George complains as they wait for Isla in the entrance lounge area.

"It's nine- it's not *that* early," Dream responds.

"Well, you've been up for hours already."

"True, but still. Boats take forever to, like, prepare and stuff."

"I don't even want to go on a stupid boat."

Dream looks up from his phone and raises an eyebrow. "You were complaining before the cooking class and stuff that the boat was cooler."

"Yeah, cooler. That doesn't mean I want to do it."

"That sucks for you, I guess. George Day ended nine and a half hours ago, and you heard Isla- they need to start getting more pictures."

"Ugh, I'm so sick of pictures."

Dream remembers last night and how close they were. Getting pictures meant getting close again. Dream shrugs. "We did sign up for this."

"You mean *you* signed up for this."

"How many times are you going to mention that?"

"As many times as I need. I was kidnapped to be here. Forced to date against my will."

"Oh my God- and you were calling *me* a baby last night. You'll be fine, George. We got gourmet mac and cheese for dinner last night, I highly doubt your suffering right now."

George scoffs. "Easy for you to say."

"What?" Dream asks, eyes narrowing.

"...What?"

"What'd you say, George?"

"Nothing. What'd you say?"

Dream rolls his eyes just as Isla walks up behind George. "Oop! What are we fighting about now?" She asks and then she proceeds to laugh at her own joke. "I'm just messin' with y'all! Anyways, are you boys ready to go? We got the photographer all loaded up and the line is startin' to form at the boat."

"Yeah, I guess," George responds.

"Try not to sound too excited, George," Dream says. George makes a face.

Isla urges them to get up by waving her hands. "I thank y'all for waiting for me- I just needed to be sure you and I were together on this little journey here. I'm your ticket into this damn boat- oop! Sorry for my language, I just can't stand-"

"It's fine," George assures her. This time, Dream was grateful for George's dryness with her. It made her shut up for a second. Isla adjusts her pencil skirt and fixes her expensive tank top.

"Now, I hope y'all are ready to be on camera for a few hours. Every couple here is on the contract with their agent and, as you know, I'm double agenting, so I won't be around often to direct y'all on what to do. I'm trusting you guys to put on that lovebird show that you were giving us back in the cooking classroom, got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," Dream mumbles.

"Great! Now put some pep in your step, Tom doesn't like to waste his fuel sittin' by the dock."

Captain Tom, Dream learned, did not like Dream or George. To be fair, Captain Tom did not like anyone apparently- even Isla's bright, cheery attitude made the old man scowl at her and fire a quick string of Spanish words at Isla that made her face fall.

"Don't touch anything, got it?" Tom hissed at George with a stubby finger pointed to his chest. Dream stepped forward a bit and Tom glared at him. "I don't want you touchin' anything either."

"We won't touch anything," Dream assures.

"None of these goddamn couples better make out on my fuckin' boat," he mumbles and he climbs the short ladder up to the captain's room above the boat deck. Dream and George exchange a look and quietly take the furthest seat away from everyone else. Everyone was silent- too scared to talk and too tired to make an effort to say something about the captain's attitude.

The boat was small and Dream could tell it was an old scuba diving boat by the long benches and wide pool deck. There was a folded up deck that was chained to the railing and rattled loudly over the motor (Which made Dream surprised since the motor sounded like a train), and half of the boat was shaded by the captain's room above. The couples sat out in the unshaded part of the boat, by the folded up deck, while Dream made sure that George sat in the shadiest part. This time, George's skin was a ghostly white from the thick sunscreen and he didn't seem to fight with Dream

about sitting in the chilly shade.

“Don’t let Tom scare ya,” Isla says and she takes a seat across from Dream and George, smoothing her skirt.

“We’re not,” George says.

“Has he always been like that?” Dream asks.

Isla thought for a second. “You know, I don’t know. The resort hired him because he was the only captain in the area who knew the reefs well enough to travel back and forth in a good time, and he does it for dirt cheap too. I think he’s just a sour puss.”

“Reef?” George asks and he sits up straighter. *Cute. Cute, cute, cute.*

“Reef,” Isla confirms. “The Keys have plenty of smaller reefs around its shores and people love the chance to swim over them without getting beaten up by waves or anything. You get to experience the wildlife and such without the painful feeling of steppin’ on seashells!”

“Reefs are cool,” Dream says.

She smiles. “Very cool, indeed. I’ve learned a thing or two about them during my travels with Mr. Grumpy. Did you know that coral is a living animal?”

“I remember hearing something about that, yeah,” Dream says.

“My husband and I used to find them all dried up on the shores and stuff! We thought they were so cool- I’m glad Mr. Grumpy warmed up to me enough to tell me those cool little facts.”

“Used to? What happened? Did the coral stop washing up?” Dream questions, picking up on her past tense. *Also, warming up to you? How do you even know if he hates you or likes you?* Dream had a feeling that she probably wiggled him into a conversation. She was good at that.

“No, my husband and I just got a divorce and we stopped walking beaches.”

Dream winces. “Oh, I’m sorry-”

“You work at a couple’s resort, though,” George points out. Dream looks at him and George realizes what he said and he presses his lips together, eyes wide. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s fine, sweetie!” Isla waves a dismissive hand. “I know, I know- if I work at a lovey-dovey resort like Moonlight, I should be madly in love, right?”

Dream feels bad for giving a weak shrug, but that was kind of what he was expecting.

“Yeah...well, I didn’t let the divorce stop me from loving love. That’s why I just get so excited to see young couples like y’all take interest in a project like this, you know? Helping show and spread the love that the resort brings out.”

Dream’s eyes drop and he slowly turns to look back at George, who was already studying him with his mouth slacked open slightly in guilt for making Isla share that. Dream feels even worse for lying to her now.

Isla coughs at their silence. “Anyways, I’ll let y’all chill here. Me and the other agents will be literally seven feet away from you guys, so if you need anything, holler!”

“Way to go, George,” Dream says in a harsh whisper.

“I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking- I didn’t expect her to-”

“To what? Explain a sensitive part in her life? You’re an idiot!”

“I was curious!”

“Well, stop it! We’re already screwing her over, we don’t need to be prying too.”

“She prys at us!” George argues and Dream rolls his eyes under his sunglasses.

“She’s allowed to! It’s her *job* to know about us.”

“Oh, ‘us’, Dream? Is there actually an ‘us?’” George teases and Dream’s heart races.

“Obviously not,” he whispers, “but, here, right now, yes. There is.”

Something about Dream’s answer made George go silent for a second, brown eyes trying to see Dream’s hidden ones, but then George groans and leans back. “How long are we here for?”

“Four more days after today.”

“Four more days of acting. Got it.”

Hurt sinks deep into Dream’s bones and he tries to shake it off because duh. Clearly, they were acting here- after all, it was Dream’s idea to do this. George’s words just reminded him that George never wanted to do this and he still didn’t. Even if he was warming up, Dream would never have a George that genuinely wanted to try. At anything.

The boat skips in the waves and current and Dream closes his eyes.

*“How’d you know when you loved me?” She had asked the night after you left.*

*I turned around in my chair. “What? What kind of question is that?”*

*“A legit one. How’d you know, Dream?”*

*“I knew I loved you when I couldn’t stop smiling,” I answered, but the smile I gave her was weak that night. Her eyes seemed to glass over.*

*She knew that her and I were thinking the same thing: I’ve already been smiling long before she came into my life.*

“I’m gonna be sick,” George moans and Dream opens his eyes to see George bent over with his head between his knees.

“For real?”

“No, for fake, Dream,” George mumbles.

“Just because of that, I’m not helping you,” Dream says.

George groans and that catches Isla’s attention. She gives a look to him and then she looks at Dream. She mouths: *Is he okay?*

Dream makes a barfing motion with his hand and Isla wrinkles her nose. “George, sweetie,” she

says in a gentle tone over the motor, “why don’t you lay down? Getting horizontal might help ya.”

The boat dips into the water again and Dream sees George’s knuckles turn white as he grips the bench. He knew George was doing that thing where if he didn’t move, he wouldn’t get sick.

“C’mon, George,” Dream mutters, bending down to George’s ear. George helped him yesterday and now Dream was paying him back. “We’re almost there, just lay down and chill.”

George peeks at him from the corner of his eye to check to see if Dream was messing with him and Dream lifts his sunglasses so George can see that he was 100% not joking. The last thing they needed was for people to know them as the people who ruin every single couple-group activity. Dream wraps a slow arm around George’s shoulders. He feels his friend take a shuddery breath and then very slowly, like Dream was dealing with a newborn baby, Dream guides his friend’s head to his knee, and George moves until he’s comfortably laying down. Dream watches as George stares up at him from his position, his face pale like it was when he got overheated. *George, you can’t catch a break, can you?*

“Better?” Dream says quietly. He’s surprised that George even heard him over the motor’s roar, but his friend gives a curt nod.

“The view isn’t as good, though,” George mumbles in a lame joke. Dream rolls his eyes. But he can’t help but repeat *as* in his head. *As good. It isn’t as good. Was it good before?*

“You can’t talk, you were ready to throw up everywhere.”

“I dunno, I’m looking up your nose right now. It’s still a possibility.”

“You’re such an idiot, George.”

“It’s like a bat cave up there.”

Dream can see Isla watching them with a soft expression. *Oh my God, if she could hear us right now-* Dream gives George a pained smile and he pinches his friend’s cheek. “Shut up before I dump you out of my lap.”

“I’m not in your lap.”

“Your head is on my knee- it’s close enough.”

George grabs Dream’s hand and he presses Dream’s fingers against his sweaty temple. “I could show you what being in your lap looks like.”

Dream’s entire chest catches fire and his brain goes blank for a second, his mouth dropping open before snapping shut, and he just *knew* his face was red. He could feel heat crawl up his neck and it didn’t take long for the image of George last night to cross his mind.

“What?” He says stupidly, wincing when his voice cracked.

“She’s looking, right?” George whispers. *Oh my God. Oh fuck, right. Right, right, right- fuck.*

“Y-yeah,” Dream says. He glances up at her and she was smiling proudly at them like she was a mom watching her kid at their talent show. The other agents were watching and a digital camera was pointed at them without shame. “Um...all of them are?”

“You’re joking.”

“Not in the slightest. Do you feel better? Can you get off now?”

An evil smile crawls on George’s face. “No, I still feel sick, Dreamie,” George moves Dream’s hand to his forehead. “Your hand feels nice.”

“You’re awful.” George knew exactly what he was doing.

“Why? I’m playing the act you wanted me to do.”

“How do my hands feel nice?” Dream says, changing the subject. “Were you joking?”

“No, they’re, like, cold. I dunno, it feels nice.”

“Thank you.”

George makes a face at him. “You’re...welcome?”

*Smooth. Even the water is smoother than you right now,* Dream thought as the boat dips into another wave. George’s mouth presses at the motion and Dream gets ready to roll him off just in case.

“How’re you not sick?” George slurs through gritted teeth.

“I used to go fishing with my dad. I’m used to it, I guess.”

“We’re never doing this again.”

“Obviously not, don’t worry.”

George shuts his eyes and Dream looks out at the horizon. The crystal water was turning white in the boat’s easing wake until a gentle roll followed the boat as it came to a stop. Through the glassy water, Dream can see colorful coral a few meters out and all sorts of fish darting around. George doesn’t move from his laying position and Captain Tom comes back down.

“Alright everyone, listen to me closely- I’ve been scuba diving in these parts for over twenty years and I know every single piece of coral in this goddamn reef. If I see one- *one*- out of place or missing coral, your ass is back on the boat and it’s staying here. Got it?”

Everyone nods.

“Good. Now I am also CPR certified which means I get to deem whether or not you’re worth saving-”

“He’s kidding,” Isla butts in, giving a nervous smile to the people.

Tom mumbles something under his breath. “That being said, don’t drown. Don’t force yourself to dive or swim long distances if you know you can’t do it. These parts are generally pretty safe from bad...what are they called?” He turns to Isla and she shakes her head at him, having no clue what he was saying. “Sharks. I meant sharks..”

“I don’t want to go swimming if there are going to be sharks,” a very familiar voice says and Dream turns his head to stare directly at Ms. Snobby.

“Trust me, the sharks don’t want you,” Dream says, still feeling the itch to get back at her from the cooking class. Tom looks at Dream.

“They’re nothing but bloodthirsty-” she starts, but Dream was five steps ahead of her.

“They probably got scared off from the noise of the boat and your voice,” Dream responds. She glares at him and opens her mouth to say something, but now Tom jumps in.

“I don’t want to hear it. The boy is right. Any sharks that were here got scared off and I can assure you, while some sharks can be a bit...aggressive, none in this reef are those types. They’ve been seeing humans here since I started diving, so you’ll be fine. But I don’t give a fuck if you swim or not. Just don’t fuck with the coral.”

Tom and Dream exchange a look for a second, Dream swears he sees a glint of respect in the man’s dead eyes.

“What are you doing, Dream?” George asks and Dream looks down. He didn’t notice that he was absentmindedly fiddling with George’s hair until he watched his finger rake through a dark lock. It was soft. *Whoops.*

“Sorry, I get fidgety when I argue,” Dream excuses, knowing damn well he wasn’t even arguing to begin with. He just had the instinct from before to play with hair.

*“Did George make it back to England?” She asked. She was laying in my lap and my finger twirled a strand of her hair around my finger.*

*“Yeah, he’s fine. He said his flight got delayed, though, but we called for a bit and we ended up booking him another flight that would leave sooner since he had to go-”*

*“You really care about him, don’t you?”*

*“He’s my best friend.”*

*She turned to look at me. “You smile a lot when he’s here.”*

George sits up and Dream’s hand falls into his lap, the memory fading from behind his eyes, and Isla sways over to them.

“Woo! Gotta get my boat legs-” she giggles and holds onto the ladder in the center of the boat deck. “Alright boys, the sooner you jump on in and give us a cute little show, the sooner we can dip on outta here and plan our next move.”

“How are we supposed to do a show in the water?” George asks. Dream tugs his shirt over his head and George whips around, taking his time to pull off his own. Dream pretends to become interested in something on the other side of the boat, staring way up at the sky.

“It’ll be tricky, but I believe in y’all. You got that chemistry, remember?” Isla says.

*Oh, we’ve got something alright. At least I do. “Definitely.”*

“Just...have fun, boys, okay? Yes, there will be a camera watching your every move for the next hour and a half, but ignore it!”

Dream watches Tom drop the foldable deck and it smacks the water, sinking a few inches in. The reef shimmers below them. *Easier said than done.*

“I’ll be up on the boat and directing Fran with her husband since they’re here with the commercial contract. Y’all are just magazine and paper, so we’ll deal with you boys after.”

*I'm still gonna call her Ms. Snobby*, Dream thought as he watched the woman dip a nervous toe in the water. *Definitely snobby*.

“Come on!” George says and he grabs Dream’s arm, yanking him across the boat deck and to the foldable deck. The water was warm and it made his tan feet look pale underneath it as he and George stood side by side on one of the open edges. Dream leans forward a bit to look at the reef below them.

“Oh, one more thing-” Tom says from the ladder, leaning against it. “The reef looks closer than it actually is. It’s about thirteen feet deep here. Have fun with that information.”

“I say we jump in and splash that lady behind us,” George whispers into Dream’s ear. It sends chills to his stomach and Dream represses a shudder. He turns his head slightly to look at Ms. Snobby.

“Cannonballs would get her from here,” Dream whispers back.

“On the count of three?”

Dream grins. “One?”

“Two..” George slides his hand down and the two link fingers, taking a slight step back.

“Three!”

Dream sucks in a breath and he jumps into the blue with George’s warm hand in his.

### 10 a.m

“Marco!”

“Polo!”

“Marco?” George says, spinning around in the water to where Dream’s voice was. Dream moved silently behind George, half of his face in the water like an alligator. “Dream, you have to say polo.”

“I know, I know. Polo.”

George turns around again and tries to kick over to him with his eyes squeezed shut, but after growing up in Florida waters, Dream easily swims to the side and watches George flail his arms at nothing. Dream grins. He moves around George again.

George groans. “Marco...?”

“Polo,” Dream says behind him and George’s eyes fly open, his friend twisting around to look at him dead in the eyes. “George! What the hell- you looked!”

“I’m not being it anymore.”

“What? Why not? It’s such a fun game.”

“For ‘polo,’ not for Marco,” George points to himself and Dream laughs. He looks around and then up at the sun.



“Okay, um...do you wanna play something else?”

“No, I just don’t want to be it.”

“Fine, I’ll be it,” Dream closes his eyes and listens for George’s loud swimming. “Marco?”

“Polo.”

*Left.* Dream swims left. “Marco?”

“Polo.” *Left again.*

“Marco.”

“Po-” Dream swings his arm to his left before George could even finish his word and is met with...

Nothing.

*What?!* “What!” Dream cries and he opens his eyes to nothing but ocean blue in front of him. He whips his head around and sees George a few feet away from him, to his left still, but *just* out of Dream’s reach. George grinned at him.

“Not so easy is it?”

“You moved out of the way!”

“That’s what you’re supposed to do!”

Dream groans and he tilts back until he feels the warm summer water lick the back of his head.

“Whatever. Let’s do something else.”

“Why? You upset you lost?”

“No,” Dream says. He can feel George stare at him. “It’s a dumb game, okay? I would’ve totally had you if you didn’t move.”

“Dream, that’s the whole point of the game. You were doing it too.”

“Whatever,” Dream repeats. George doggy paddles over to him.

“You’re so mad. Look, tag me.”

Dream turns his head in the water and half of the world goes muffled- underwater being surprisingly louder than the surface. George holds up his arm in front of him and gives Dream a cocky grin.

“Go on. Tag me.” Dream rolls his eyes and swims upright again, lifting his tanned hand out of the water to land a solid smack onto George’s forearm. “Better?” George asks.

“You’re so dumb,” Dream says. But he did. He felt good tagging George since he totally deserved that first tag anyways.

“I’m getting out then.”

“What? Oh come on, ‘cause I called you dumb?”

George runs a quick hand through his hair to fix it. “Hm, yeah, and I’m getting tired from

swimming. I would rather not drown.”

“Isla said-”

“I don’t care about what Isla said,” George says harshly, his hand splashing back in the water, “I know we have to get photographed. But I am *not* risking getting mouth-to-mouth from the guy on the boat.”

George starts to swim away, doing an awkward side doggy paddle, and it takes a second for Dream to swim after him. “Are you gonna come back in? I mean, you were seasick on the boat-”

“I wasn’t sick.”

Dream rolls his eyes. *Yeah, okay.* “Sure...but either way, you realize we have to suck it up and do a photo shoot right? Do it for Isla, George.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” his friend says. *God, he’s so stubborn,* Dream thought as they swam up to the deck, clinging on to the metal railing of the ladder in the clear water. The wind is cold against Dream’s wet skin as he pulls himself slightly out of the water so he can see the reef waving under them.

“You made her talk about her divorced husband. The least you can do is cling onto me like a little sea monkey.”

George makes a face before giving a quick snort of laughter at Dream’s word choice and his smile is wide as he gazes up at Dream from under his eyelashes. “Sea monkey?” He repeats.

“You know what I mean,” Dream responds, shoving George’s shoulder.

“What’s a sea monkey, Dream?”

“I dunno. It’s something I made up.”

“No, you didn’t. What is it?”

Dream shakes his head, but his smile was contradicting him. “It’s a monkey in the ocean, George. Why do I have to explain that to you? The definition is right there.”

“I have a feeling you know what a sea monkey is and you just don’t want to tell me.”

“...Okay, it’s, like, a shrimp or something, but I don’t-”

George laughs, “I *knew* that you knew what it was!”

“Okay!? Why is that bad that I know what a sea monkey is? We used to get-”

“-them all the time during your family’s vacation, I know,” George finishes, still smiling up at Dream. George was drifting closer to him in the water from the weak current. *Or is he actually getting closer?* Dream eases a few inches back to keep the space. “You told me months ago.”

“You remembered?”

“Of course I did, it was a stupid story.” Despite the mean jab at Dream, George’s voice was gentle and there was not an ounce of meanness in his words.

Dream focuses on the bright red fan coral under his feet. “What does that have to do with

anything?"

"You used sea monkey in the wrong way since they don't hold onto each other. I was seeing if you knew that you messed up," George says.

*No, I was right, Dream thought and he moves out of the way so George can climb out of the water. Sea monkeys hold on to each other- but I'm not gonna tell him why. He can figure that out for himself.*

**10:18 a.m**

*"You look bored," she said. I stare at my computer screen, but I don't turn to her. "What's going on with you?"*

*"Nothing..." I eye George's offline icon on the Discord. He hasn't been online in days. "Nothing at all."*

*"Is it George?"*

*The question makes me tense and I turned to her. "What?"*

*"Is it George?" She repeated, so simply.*

*"Why would it be George?"*

*"Come on, Dreamie," she said. The nickname makes my skin crawl. It sounds wrong on her tongue- too forced, too sharp. "He's your best friend who's been MIA. I know you're worried and I know you're trying to reach out to him, but it's been days, and you've been sitting there for hours doing nothing. Don't you think if he wanted to talk to you, he would by now?"*

*I don't respond because she's right. If George did want to talk, he would. He would've responded to me and he would've told me what was happening to him. Yet, she was wrong at the same time. George was never a talker.*

*She continues, "Dreamie," She watched me cringe slightly, "let him go for today. You've done what you could. He'll come back."*

*Her voice sounds sad and that's why I forced my finger to turn off my computer and go to her.*

*But I really wanted to go to you, George.*

*I really did.*

Dream's pupils burn as he stares up at the white sun burning his chest as he floats on his back. The water was getting boring and the other couples swimming were too busy clinging to each other like sea otters to be any fun. George was still camped out on the boat deck, under the shade, laying down on the bench with an arm over his eyes. Isla was shouting over the deck to Ms. Snobby. The camera people got bored of watching Dream drift and focused their attention on others. Dream was alone with people around him.

Dream lets out a steady breath as the wind blows. Tiny waves hit his face, splashing burning saltwater into his eyes and he shoots upright, rubbing his palm against them in a hiss of pain.

*Ow, ow, owowowowo-OW! Stupid ocean water- Holy shit, I forgot how much it hurts. Dream*

blinks against the pain as salt starts to dry on his eyelids. However, when his blurred vision does focus, he spots something shimmering down on the ocean floor. Whatever it was, it glinted in the sun like a diamond and that was enough to snag Dream's curiosity like the goddamn fish swimming in circles over it. He looked around him for Tom, but Dream had drifted a bit far from the boat, so technically, if he was careful, he *could* sneak down to get it. It was nestled between two pieces of yellow coral in the white sand, but Dream could get it without touching them. Bracing himself for the painful dive that was about to follow, Dream takes one look at George, who had his head turned to Dream, and then Dream sucks in a breath.

"One..." he whispers, remembering the countdown he and George did before. George's hands were warm.

He sucks in another breath. "Two."

Dream focuses down at the shimmering object. It reminded Dream of the sun in George's eyes last night. *No time to think about that.* "Three."

Dream slams his face into the water, and his first instinct is to shoot back up and screw his eyes shut against the saltwater, but he fights through the pain. He slowly swims down to the reef with his vision skewed and blurred- like a painter swiped their hand across a wet canvas- but he could see *just* enough to tell that he was heading in the right direction. The shiny object kept him on course as the pressure weighed down on his body, making his ears and eyes hurt. *Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.*

His lungs burn. Dream was far from a swimmer and his body was not used to holding its breath for this long, and it made Dream's heart pound. The reef was further down than he realized, but he kept kicking.

He accidentally hits a fish with his hand and he jumps, a stream of bubbles escaping his lips from the quick gasp of shock. *Fuck.* Dream's eyes water as he suppresses a cough against the seawater in his mouth. He can feel sand between his teeth. *Keep going. Keep going. I'm almost there. Just...a...few...more...feet...*

Dream can feel his heartbeat in his head and neck as his hands graze the soft white sand, stirring up a dusty cloud. The two yellow coral beamed at him in the sunlight and he smiled back, making sure no air escaped his tight lips. *I need to be quick.*

His body was tired from the descent and his ears were hurting like hell, but he slowly reached forward between the coral. The branches felt spongy and solid, like fingers, and small fish and shrimp darted out from his touch. His hair waves in front of his eyes and he feels like a hand is clamped around his throat. *Come on, Clay. Come ON-*

His fingers brush something sharp and definitely metallic, so he swipes it and wastes no time planting his feet into the white sand, and he shoots himself up from the bottom. Dream's eyes hurt from the rush of water hitting them and his ears pop painfully as he watches the surface grow closer and closer until-

"- EAM!"

He coughs and chokes, chest heaving as black dots enter his vision for a few seconds. He feels saltwater pour out of his nose. *How nice.*

"Dream!"

He chokes again and makes his way back to the boat with sloppy strokes. The object was biting into his hand and it hurt, but he got it. That's all that mattered.

"Dream, what the hell were you doing?!" George shouts at him from the boat, leaning over the railing. *Well, at least he doesn't look sick anymore.*

"I...I got a-a thi...ng," Dream pants out. George glares at him.

"What?"

Dream clings onto the boat's ladder and rests his forehead against the hot metal. His burning skin kept him grounded into reality as George quickly went to him, sitting on the submerged deck with his feet dangling to the reef under them.

"This thingy."

Dream thrusts his hand out and for the first time since he saw it, Dream gets a good look at the object he almost died for. A giant metal fishhook lays in his palm and they stare at it.

"You almost drowned..." George starts, looking at the hook, "...for a fishhook?"

"To be...to be fair," Dream huffs, blinking away saltwater. "I didn't...know wh-what it was."

"You're bleeding."

Dream cracks open an eye and sure enough, a pink puddle of water pools in his palm from a cut on his pointer finger. The finger that first felt the hook in between the coral.

"I probably cut it picking it up, I'm fine."

"Does it hurt?"

Dream turns the sharp hook in his hands and then wiggles his bleeding finger. "Not really."

George sighs and rubs his face. "You're stupid, Dream. One of the stupidest people I've met and-"

"Am I stupid or am I just the first person you've met to drown themselves for a fishhook?"

"Both," George says without any hesitation.

"It wasn't worth it," Dream admits and he pulls himself up on the dock once he gets enough strength. He sits next to George and watches the waves lap over their legs and waists as they sit.

"You know, that would've been kinda funny," George says.

"What would?"

"If you drowned. That guy would have given you CPR and I would've *loved* to see that," George states and that makes Dream laugh.

"Yeah, of course you would've."

"I mean, come on, Dream-" George lifts Dream's hand that has the hook in it. "A fish hook?"

"I thought it would be something cooler...like treasure or something."

"Some long lost compass from a pirate ship?"

Dream grins. “Exactly. But,” he holds the hook up to the sun, “I’d say this is pretty cool.”

“There’s nothing cool about pollution,” a gruff voice says behind them and Dream twists to look at Tom. “Good eye, boy. Things like those don’t belong on them coral reefs.”

Dream doesn’t say anything but he watches Tom attach a red flag to a flimsy rope by tying a tight knot around it. “What’s that for?”

“Sharks.”

“Oh,” Dream says. *Oh.* He looks down at his cut dripping red into the water around them. The boys look down at his finger and then slowly up at each other in a moment of *This is gonna be good.*

The swimmers spot the flag, but make no move to come to the boat. So Tom cups his hands and lets out a loud whistle that makes George wince and duck his head between his shoulders, before raising a single, stiff hand to his forehead.

*“You remind me of a shark,” she said.*

*“A what?”*

*“A shark.”*

*She peeled herself off of my chest and stared at me with those sad eyes. I try not to stare directly at her, but I wait for her to continue. “Yeah?”*

*“Sharks are mysterious animals, Dream,” she whispered and she pressed her forehead to mine, but it’s awkward and I could smell mint on her breath. “You’re mysterious too. There are so many thoughts inside your head, but no one can figure you out.”*

*“No,” I said, “I think you can’t figure me out.”*

*Because you always knew what I was thinking. You don’t even have to ask me, George, because you always know. It’s weird that you can read me but I never learned how to read you.*

*I think that’s when I knew that something wasn’t right with me and her.*

“Dream!” George gasps and Dream blinks. Instead of staring at those sad, knowing eyes, he’s staring at the water and there’s something big cutting through it. George grabs Dream’s arm in shock as they watch a Blacktip shark cruise meters away from them with its fin slowly sinking back under the water as it dives down. Its movements were somehow jerky and smooth at the same time and it moved like it owned the reef- and in a way, it did.

Dream’s heart lifts in excitement and he doesn’t even care that the swimming couple came racing in with small yelps of fear, splashing water all over him and George as they sit and watch the animal move. Tom gives a low whistle as the shark swims further into the reef.

Tom doesn’t let them back in the water and Dream could hear Ms. Snobby having a meltdown behind him, but eventually, two or three Blacktips swim all around the reef. Dream watches with an amazed smile as one passes right under the dock he was sitting on and he could feel the water underneath him move rapidly from the shark’s speed. George’s feet shoot up and he sits with his feet tucked up for the rest of the time.

“That was...” George starts when the sharks leave the area.

“Cool,” Dream says almost silently, still reeling from the experience.

“Now that,” Tom says with a stubby finger pointing out to where the sharks swam off, “was cool, boy. Now you and your boyfriend come back on the boat- I got another goddamn tour to pick up.”

### 10:45 a.m

She was wrong.

Dream wasn't a shark. Far from it.

It was George that was the shark.

“Aw man,” George sighs and he holds up his soaked shirt. It must've fallen on the deck in George's scramble to see if Dream was drowning. Dream chuckles and holds out his dry shirt.

“Here, take it,” Dream says. “We can't have you getting sunburnt again.”

Dream tries not to show his surprise when George does take his shirt, tugging the loose material over his damp hair, watching as it drowns George's torso in a big green mass.

“Hi y'all, um-” Isla says, taking a seat next to Dream. She looked frazzled, but she still managed to smile at George wearing Dream's t-shirt. “That's cute. You're a good boyfriend Dream...always carin' and stuff.”

“Yeah, I-”

“George, can you run and grab a bandaid from the lower deck? Tom should be down there,” Isla says. That's when Dream notes the change of tone in her voice. Dream's stomach churned and he felt seasick like George.

“Um,” George's eyes shift from her to Dream, “sure, I guess.”

George leaves and Isla doesn't miss a beat as she says, “Look, Dream, I know y'all are uncomfortable with being photographed and I know you don't like it when we ask questions, but I need you to be straight with me-” Dream's heart is in his throat, “-are y'all fighting right now?”

A moment of relief. “What? No! No, we aren't-”

“Then what is going on with you?”

His blood pressure spikes again. “Huh?”

“Y'all are...” she sighs, “Y'all are adorable, don't get me wrong- but you're a bit boring to the cameras. I understand that you are uncomfortable with all of this. George is practically spelling out how much he hates it here, but listen, Dream,” her voice is desperate, “try. I need you to *try*. The boss is down my neck with y'all and I really like you two and I fought for you to be here. Don't give him a reason to throw you boys out.”

“I got the bandaid,” George says behind him and Dream doesn't turn around. He knows his face is pale and green and all sorts of colors. His body is frozen solid as Isla plasters a smile on her face and she takes the bandaid from George.

“Give me your finger, honey,” Isla whispers. As she tears open the bandage, she grabs Dream's

shaky hand and she leans in slightly, making sure George couldn't hear them. "I apologize if I scared you, Dream. But, sweetie, you're here on an agreement, remember? Give us something."

She wraps the bandaid around his still bleeding finger and she pats the back of his hand before standing up, smoothing her skirt, and walking back to the other agents. The bandaid is too tight and he can feel his racing pulse pound against it.

"Dream? Dream, what'd she say?" George asks, fear leaking into his words. "Does she-" he lowers his voice. "Does she know?"

Dream makes eye contact with Isla and she gives him a slight nod to George. "No...No, she doesn't. She just wants us to step it up."

"What? I thought we agreed-"

"I know what we agreed, George, but we have to do something. We didn't do anything in the water, we barely did anything at the cooking class- I mean, *George*," Dream pleads and he hates that it sounds like he's begging. In reality, he was fucking terrified at the situation unfolding in front of his eyes. "George, there has to be something we can do."

*This is too much. Way too much. This was a horrible idea, I should've never asked George to do this- this fucking fight was never worth a thirty minute swim over the reef. I came here to have fun with a friend and instead, he's pressing himself against me and-*

"George?" Dream whispers, his voice cracking. George leans in closer and there's a warm hand around his neck.

"Let me do this, Dream," George whispers. "Don't move, okay?"

"Why? What are you-"

"Do you ever stop asking questions?" George snips and Dream closes his mouth. George lets a long breath and then, very slowly, George pushes Dream's head down a bit so their foreheads meet. Dream's eyes screw shut because he can't look at George. He can't. He can't have this image burned behind his eyelids because they were even closer than the night before. Dream's rib cage rattles.

Dream keeps his eyes closed and he can feel George tilt his head and *his lips are right there. Oh my God. He's so close. Close. I can feel him breathing.*

"Don't. Move." George warns. *He saw it last night. He knows I was going to lean in.*

George's other hand slides up to his neck and Dream can sense George's face move behind his closed eyes. Dream's breath hitches when George's breath tickles his ear. Then, in a moment of last-minute panic for their stay at this stupid resort, George presses his cheek against Dream's and George pulls him into a hug. Dream's arms waste no time wrapping around George's clothed torso, grabbing handfuls of green fabric.

He feels George's breathing shudder against his ear and Dream closes his eyes tighter. He wonders if George could feel his heart pounding.

George gently nestles against Dream's temple and something colorful pops in Dream's chest. He feels rain settle over his skin.

There's a photo click and Dream lets himself take in one last second of holding George, before



pulling away. However, just as Dream begins to move back, he feels lips brush against his cheek quickly and then George is back in front of him with that stupid, neutral expression on his face. Except this time, there's a blush deep in George's cheeks.

"Sorry," his friend says dryly.

"You're fine, don't worry."

George doesn't respond and he turns away from Dream, watching the Keys slowly come back into view. At this moment, Dream felt an ecstatic rush of adrenaline course through his veins, but then in a sickening realization, he saw something cold settling on George's features. He tries to ignore it.

Dream turns to Isla and she smiles. *Thank you*, she mouths. He gives a lame smile as his stomach sinks because he knows he upset George.

He pushed George too far this time.

### 11 a.m

George won't talk to him.

Not like Dream cared. He didn't need George to talk to him- hell, what was there to even talk about? Nothing! They were sitting in their room and Dream filled his time by taking a long, hot shower to irritate his cut and his light sunburn. The pain distracted his brain from thinking about George's cold lips brushing against his cheek. That had to be an accident.

*It was one, Clay, don't be a dumbass*, Dream cursed. He swiped at the fog on the mirror so he could see terrified green eyes stare at himself. *You think George wanted to do that? No. No, he didn't. You just look like a dick now.*

Dream gets changed and steps out, staring at George who didn't even look at him. He still had Dream's t-shirt on and still smelled like fishy saltwater. Dream was hungry, though, so eventually, George would have to talk to him.

"George." No response, but George does spare him a brief glance. "Are you hungry?"

A shrug. *Yes*.

"Do you want to eat?"

"I'll eat later," George says. His scrolling on his phone didn't stop.

"Look, I'm sorry-"

"Don't worry about it, Dream."

"Fine. Fine, alright. Will you talk to me now?"

"I am talking to you."

"You're responding to me, not talking. Talking is holding a conversation and right now, I'm the one doing all the holding."

George sits up and shrugs. "There's nothing to talk about. Unless you have something you want to say, Dream?"

Dream's mouth falls open for a second. *Shit.*

"Nope. Nothing," Dream says.

*"Nothing?" She said.*

*"I don't want anything," I responded.*

*"You have to want something, Dream."*

*"I don't know what I want."*

*She sighed. "You never do."*

George sighs and for a second, Dream thought he was living in a memory. But his friend moves without a word to the shower, shutting the door loudly and Dream doesn't breathe until the lock clicks.

That's when Dream realizes that George was the shark here.

George- a guy that was clouded in mystery and moved so gracefully that it made Dream stop and gawk in wonder anytime he did something. George was something so dangerous. A fast thinking predator that would tear Dream to shreds just because he was swimming in his waters and that is *exactly* what Dream did. Dream swam into a territory George didn't like last night and now George was going to eat him alive with his curious glances and cold expression.

A shark's eyes are like a void where any emotion is anyone's best guess. George's eyes were dark brown and guarded where Dream could fall into a spiral of wondering and wondering and wondering and *never* reach a solid conclusion. George was a shark.

Then what did that make Dream?

Dream finally moves from his spot and walks to the balcony. The sky and water were so calm. Everyone on the decks below were laughing and talking in the tropical wind that smelled so much like saltwater and palm trees- it was almost like nothing had happened. Life carried on around him despite his cracking friendship.

*George, do you remember that day? The day I told you I got a girlfriend?*

Dream closes his eyes and listens to the hiss of the waves.

*We were on the phone with Sapnap. I remember blurting it out because we were messing around and joking about how none of us could manage to grab a girl- and I remember thinking 'This is it! It's the perfect moment...too good to be true!' and I said it. At the time, I didn't notice how you had fallen silent while Sapnap joked about it being your mom.*

*You were so quiet after that, George.*

...

*I wish you would've said something.*

Dream cracks open his eyes and watches couples walk hand in hand down the beach. He sighs. *And*

*you did.*

*“Dream,” George said. It was months after my announcement. Months into the shiny relationship and this was the first time he called me. “Do you like her?”*

*“Duh, what kind of question is that?”*

*“Not a question. Confirmation,” he had joked but it didn’t sound like one. Yet, I remember laughing.*

*“For what?”*

*George blew a raspberry into the mic. “Just making sure.”*

*“You’re weird.”*

*“Goodbye, Dream.”*

*“Goodbye, George!”*

*Even though we were just hanging up the call, you sounded different. Like you were actually saying goodbye to me, George. Like that was the last time you were ever going to talk to me. But you called me again the next day and the day after that, and every day- I remember you always ended the call by asking that question. What were you confirming, George?*

*“Do you still like her?”*

*I rolled my eyes. “I mean, she lives with me now, so I’m pretty sure I like her.”*

*You went silent for the second time because of her. “She...lives with you?”*

*“Yeah! Did Sapnap not tell you?”*

*“No,” you said, “no one did.”*

*So that’s what I did to you, right? You thought...you thought you were in the way, right? That I didn’t need you anymore?*

Dream’s eyes fly open when he hears the bathroom door creak open and Dream turns to look at George. The two stare at each other and Dream desperately wants to say something, but he knows he can’t because if he did, George was going to slip from him for good. So instead, Dream clenches his jaw and George doesn’t look away from Dream until there’s a knock from somewhere in the hall. In an instant, George breaks the gaze and Dream turns back into a ghost.

**11:05 a.m**

*I do need you, George.*

*“Clay- tell me,” she had pleaded with tears in her eyes. This was it. This was the exact moment we both realized we weren’t going to last. “What is it that you want? I keep asking and asking but you never give me any answers and-”*

*“You’re rambling,” I pointed out.*

*She gave a watery laugh. "Of course I am! I've worked my ass off to keep us together and here you are, a year and a half later, still shrugging your shoulders at me like I'm nothing but an annoying fly in your ear."*

*"Look," I said with a steady voice. Truth was, I wasn't upset she was leaving. I didn't feel that sinking feeling when I saw her on the couch with her purple luggage around her ankles with tissues bundled in her fist. I felt...relieved. "I'm sorry, okay? I am. But I never answered because I-*

*"You don't know, Clay. I know. I know, I know, I know!" She cried.*

*"I don't know what to say to you anymore."*

*"But you always know what to say to him, right?"*

*I didn't know what she meant in the moment and who 'he' was, but now I do. She had always known about us- long before I ever realized and she could see it on you when I couldn't.*

*When I don't respond, she rolls her sad eyes. "Goodbye, Clay. I hope you can figure out what you want."*

*And with that, she gathers her things and I hold open the door for her, watching her figure as she dips into her car and dissolves out of my sight.*

*That's when I went to you. I waited to hear the grin in your voice and I waited for you to say something to make my dull heart beat just a bit faster, but you never did, and for some reason, I never cared. Did you move on, George?*

Dream's eyes hurt from looking over the sea.

*I wish you would tell me what I did to you to make you so closed off.*

"Dream," George's voice says behind him. Dream doesn't turn around because he's scared of what would come out of his mouth if he did. "There's people at the door."

Dream throws open the door without looking at George's face, but when he sees who it is, he wishes he took his chance with word vomiting at George. "Hi, Isla."

"Hi, y'all! Can I step in for a second?" She asks, tugging on her braid slightly. Dream lets her in and George pretends to be busy organizing his suitcase to avoid sitting next to Dream on the bed. Isla shuts the door behind her and then her eyes widen. "Wow, I hope I didn't barge in at a bad time for y'all, the tension in here is thicker than puddin'."

"No, you're fine," George says.

She looks at Dream and clears her throat. "I just came in here to mention that the resort is holding a scavenger hunt for the couples here and I think it's in your best interest to join. It's super easy, knocks out a few hours, and you get to keep the prize."

George sits up. "Prize?"

"Don't get too excited- it's a seashell we spray painted gold," Isla sighs.

"We'll do it. Do we need to act-" Dream covers up the word with a cough, pretending like he was choking on his spit. "Sorry-" *Way to go, dumbass*, "do we need to actually hunt for anything or

what?"

"Um...yes, it's a scavenger hunt," Isla says slowly like it was a stupid question. And it was. But Dream's brain was scrambled from everything and that was the first save that came to his mind to cover up his slip up. He can feel George's radiating look on his cheek, but Dream pretends to not notice it.

"You know, Dream's not feeling too well," George speaks up, "maybe we should stay--"

"No! No, I'm fine," Dream rushes to say. Isla gives him a grateful look and then her face falls a bit.

"It starts at noon, boys! I expect to see y'all there," she says and that was the driest Dream has heard her talk.

When she leaves, Dream immediately turns to his friend. "George, listen, we--"

"It's fine, Dream," George says. But it wasn't fine and Dream knew that. He was pushing George way too hard this morning and he could tell George was frustrated with everything. "I don't care."

*"How many stars, Dream?" You asked, your voice fading into sleep.*

*I eyed your face through my phone screen and I could see the faint glow of the stars over your head. I couldn't see all of them, but I didn't tell you, so I started counting the freckles on your cheeks. "One...two...three..."*

*I counted and counted, moving from freckles to eyelashes, to how many times you smiled in your sleep. I know you showed me your glow stars, but I never cared about them that night. I cared about you.*

### **12:15 p.m**

There was a lot of work to find the stupid seashell.

"Okay..." Dream says. "Next up, we have to find the painting donated by Martha Windstock."

"Who?" George asks.

"I don't know! Some lady that donated art, I'm guessing. Do you know where they keep all the paintings?"

"No."

"Thank you so much, George."

His friend rolls his eyes as they make the trek around the resort *again*. "No problem."

It's been fifteen minutes and they've only crossed off the first item on their list, which was easy enough- it was the giant fountain in the lobby. Everyone who had the genius idea to participate in this hunt immediately checked it off and scattered in different directions, leaving Dream and George to fend for themselves in a place they barely explored.

"We should've paid more attention when we were running from Isla," Dream mutters. George doesn't say anything.

It's been that pattern for a few hours now, so nothing new.

"Do you remember when you drew me?" George asks suddenly.

*"Look, I drew you!" I said and I held up my sticky note to the camera. It was a shitty stick figure with giant glasses on its face, but it made your mouth fall open in mock shock.*

*"Dream!" You laughed. "That's...."*

*"Amazing?"*

*"I was gonna say awful- please don't pursue any hobby in art."*

*You made me laugh again. A laugh that shook my insides and made my head spin. "What?! Oh, come on, what if I wanted to be an artist? You're going to destroy my dreams like that?"*

*"Yep. Don't become an artist, Dream. For me and for the rest of the word, okay?"*

*"Fine. For you, I won't be an artist."*

*You didn't notice how I only mentioned you. Or maybe you did, but you ignored it because you were already out of my reach.*

*But I didn't miss how you took a screenshot of me holding up the drawing.*

"Yeah?" Dream says finally, falling out of the memory.

"I wonder if this is gonna be just as bad."

"Don't be rude, George," Dream responds, but he's glad that George is making a lame effort at a conversation.

"I'm just here because I have to be. Martha can take my heat."

"Heat?" Dream chuckles. "If that's your heat then the winter must be scorching."

"Are you calling my heat cold, Dream?"

"Maybe. Are you calling Martha's painting shitty?"

"Yeah, I am."

Dream stops in front of a hallway lined with paintings. "Then yes. I'm calling your 'heat' cold."

George makes a noise of disagreement but takes the right side of the hallway while Dream takes the left, the boys scanning the golden nameplates for good ol' Martha's artwork.

"Found it!" Dream says from the end of the hallway. George turns his head after gazing at a painting of the night sky over the ocean.

"Is it bad?"

Dream checks the box next to Martha's name on their list before studying it. It was a simple painting of a tidal pool with tufts of beach grass on the rolling dunes in front of it.

"I think it's good," Dream responds.

George walks over, still keeping his distance, but there's a small smile on his face. "It's alright."

"Oh, please, like you could do better."

"I can."

"George, you're colorblind. I bet you couldn't even name half of the colors she used in this."

"Wow, Dream, making fun of the colorblind now, are we?"

"You called this poor woman's artwork 'alright.'"

"Dream, like, all of these paintings show the ocean. It's not special. It's a tidal pool."

George walks off, already asking what the next item was and clearly eager to get this hunt over with, but Dream lingers at the painting for a moment longer burning the gentle blue waves into his eyes.

*"The ocean is a dangerous place, Clay," my dad had said one summer. We were sitting out on the beach as the sun set and our toes dug into the cool sand. It was a few weeks after my high school graduation, but my family seemed to know I wasn't going to bother applying to colleges. Not when I had Youtube and a new life to focus on.*

*"Well...yeah. I know."*

*My dad chuckled and he turned to me. "Don't let it scare you, though. Sometimes, the most dangerous and misunderstood things are the prettiest and most loving."*

*"What is this? Philosophy hour?" I joked. He cracked a smile and he gave me a small look and that's when I knew it was his own way to tell me to be careful.*

*To be careful with you, George.*

### **1 p.m**

The last item.

"How are they going to tell us where everything else is, but then say something as vague as 'Find the seashell?'" Dream asks George.

"I dunno, Dream! I'm not the one who made the list."

"This is bullshit," Dream decides and he shoves the paper into George's hands. "You lead us now."

"I'm not leading-"

"I did it the *whole* time, so the least you can do is try and-"

"I didn't even want to-"

"Oh my God, you were just making jokes about stealing other people's lists and-"

"Yeah, *jokes!* I wasn't serious!" George exclaims, snapping the paper out in his hands. "But

whatever, I'll lead us to the finish line."

"There is no finish line?"

"It's a metaphor, Dream."

Dream scoffs. "A pretty stupid one since there are no finish lines in scavenger hunts."

"Well, do you have a better one?" George asks, scanning the list for any clues.

"...Tons, actually," Dream lies. He couldn't think of one right now, but he wasn't letting George get the upper hand.

"Okay, name it."

"How about you lead us to the last thing, idiot."

"Okay, okay, okay. Chill out."

George folds up the list and the two walk down hallway after hallway, having small bursts of conversation, but all ultimately die out when they pass by a giggling couple or a resort member. And when they did, Dream would watch George's face flicker with a cold expression before his friend seemed to swallow it and push on with the hunt- folding and unfolding the list in a fit of awkwardness.

Isla was right about the hunt eating up time though. It's been an hour since they started and they were just finishing up. However, after it, Dream had no idea what they were going to do. Dream didn't want to cower in their room like George wanted to do, but Isla made no sign that she had more stuff planned for them.

*I don't even know why she wanted us to do this in the first place*, Dream thought as he dug his sandal into the floor. George stopped to reread the list, eyes narrowing.

"I don't get it," George says. "We've been everywhere and we haven't seen anything."

"Should we go back and retrace our steps?"

"That'll take too long."

"Not like we have anything to do, though," Dream shrugs.

George's face goes sour. "Yeah, true, but I don't wanna do this for the whole day. It's boring."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know...not this," George responds, gesturing to the hallway around them. Dream sighs as he looks up to the popcorn ceiling.

"Okay, I get it, George."

"I really don't think you do." In an instant, like someone flipped a switch in George's brain, his friend's voice went harsh and Dream winces slightly. Dream doesn't respond and that seemed to make George angrier, but George hates confrontation, so instead, his friend looks back down to the list. "Let's try the lobby again."

"Okay," Dream breathes out.



Dream didn't think it was in the lobby, but he didn't have the heart to tell George that they were probably heading in the completely wrong direction. No use in poking an already pissed off bear.

*I wish you would tell me what I did to you to make you so closed off.*

*What did I do? I asked you to visit me in Florida and you came with barely any questions. You spent three days on my couch and now you're here, sleeping next to me, but I don't have a clue what you're feeling towards me. Sure, you're angry now, but are you really mad at me? You're never mad.*

*But, God, am I mad at you.* Dream's hands curl into fists as he walks a few steps behind his friend to the lobby. *I'm mad at you because I've never wanted to know what's going on in someone's mind as much as yours.*

*What are you thinking? What. Are you. Thinking? Do you get the memories too? Did you want to lean it last night too? Did you feel how fucking good it was to touch on the boat too?* The questions whirl around Dream's brain as he mindlessly searched the lobby- peering through plants and into the fountain's water. All he saw was a universe of coins blink up at him and his own hard expression. *No wonder George didn't want to talk to me.*

"Anything?" George calls.

Dream shakes his head, watching himself in the water. "Nothing."

"Okay, well, I give up then," George groans, sitting on the edge of the fountain. Dream sits and George hands him the list. "We looked everywhere. It's not here."

"It literally has to be."

"It's not."

"It is."

"It's not."

Dream inhales sharply and smacks the paper down. "I don't know any better than you do, okay? It's probably somewhere outside."

"That's stupid, Dream."

"Better than your lobby idea."

"Whatever," George snaps and he looks at the checked boxes. "Do these things have something in common?"

Dream spares a glance, but he doesn't bother reading the list. "I told you: I don't know."

"You're the worst scavenger hunt partner ever."

"You're going to say that after I carried us through the entire list?"

"You gave me the hardest item!" George says, throwing his hands up.

"Not on purpose and it's not even hard. You don't wanna *try*," Dream snaps. His anger trumps his shyness and he stares directly at George as he puts emphasis on the word 'try' because it was true. George never wanted to try at anything. George seems to pick up on it because his friend's eyes

narrow slightly.

“I told you that I didn’t want to do it.”

“I understand that, George- you don’t have to keep bringing it up.” *It hurts more every time you do.*

George looks like he wants to say something, but he closes his eyes for a second, letting out a quick breath. “Good,” he says and Dream is taken back by the gentle tone, “I’m glad you understand that now.”

Dream sees an eyelash sitting on George’s cheekbone and he takes a quick swipe at it, thumb brushing quickly against George’s skin, and George grabs at Dream’s wrist with a tight grip.

“You just *love* pushing it, don’t you?” George growls and with that, he throws Dream’s hand down, and shoots up, making their scavenger list flutter in the fountain water. Dream wastes no time going after him.

“George! George, stop-” Dream grabs George’s shoulder but his friend shrugs him off easily. “It was an *eyelash*, idiot! Why are you freaking out?!”

“*Why* am I freaking out?” George laughs and he spins around suddenly. Dream almost runs into him.

“Yes! I was getting an eyelash off of your cheek- I was being nice!”

“Did you have to-” George starts to say but his mouth snaps shut and all the tension leaves his body in a whoosh. George looked like a skeleton with his tired eyes sunken in slightly and hands gripping his arms as he folded them.

“What? Did I have to what?”

“Forget about it. I’m going back to our room.”

George starts to walk away and Dream’s gut instinct is to follow. “Here, when we get back-”

“Alone, Dream.”

“What?” Dream walks faster to catch up to George’s side. “Come on, don’t get mad at me, George,” his voice is as desperate as Isla’s on the boat, “I know today was a lot, and I’m sorry, but-”

“Are you sorry, Dream?”

“Yes,” Dream responds with no hesitation. He wasn’t sorry for what they did, but he was sorry that it pushed George. His answer calmed George down a bit because his friend’s steps slow a bit.

“I think I might go to the arcade, actually,” George says, changing his direction.

“Are we going to play air hockey again?”

“On second thought, I might check out the shop.”

“I saw that they had hoodies there. Maybe we could-”

“Dream,” George stops dead in the middle of the hallway, turning to him with brown eyes blazing. “I want to be alone. I don’t need you following me. I don’t need *you*. We’ve spent days together,

Dream, can't I be by myself for a few minutes?"

The words cut like a hot knife into Dream's chest- they don't hurt until they settle into the cracks of his brain and then the aching pain hits him all at once. "Well, yeah, I just thought-"

George shakes his head. "I know what you thought."

Dream doesn't say anything, so George turns around and walks away to some secret place in the resort, and Dream doesn't follow.

*"Did it hurt, dude?" Sapnap asked me a few days after I broke up with her.*

*"Not really. It's kinda nice to have my own place back."*

*"How are you not heartbroken? I would be, like, crying to every breakup song on earth right now."*

*"I dunno," I said, "I guess it wasn't as real as I thought it was."*

But this was real. George said those things because of Dream and the thought of it being his fault made him lost all over again. Walking back to the fountain to see their drenched and tearing list floating in the water, Dream sighs, and he walks in the opposite direction.

### 5 p.m

George's definition of a 'few minutes' was a few hours apparently. Dream was able to clean up and sort his dirty clothes in his suitcase, put out the new shampoo bottles for them in the bathroom, watch two cable movies, make a rant thread on Twitter, *and* he was able to watch a game of volleyball on the beach below him without any interruptions. It was a long, long afternoon without George, but what else was there to do? Isla never showed up. George never responded to Dream's 'where are you?' text. Dream was alone.

"So much for five-star," Dream mumbled on their bed, flipping through the brochure that he found in one of the dresser drawers. It listed every single on-sight activity and despite the list being two pages long, there was nothing Dream could do by himself or without Isla's pass. There was nothing for Dream to do.

Except, the gym was the *only* place completely open to the public without needing a pass. It was also the only place Dream could go to, alone, without looking like a total loser. Yet, Dream wasn't much of a gym and exercise kind of guy. He played soccer and football as a kid, but that was pretty much it.

Dream looks at the empty screen of his phone, then he looks down at the brochure, then to the closed door of their room. He had a choice here: wait for his best friend to come back so they could argue some more or Dream could blow off some steam at a place he had no idea how to work.

It was a no brainer. Dream didn't want George to see him cooped up in their room like a sad lump, so he grabs his headphones and their room key, and he leaves to go think.

### 5:20 p.m

*“How’d you know you loved mom?” I asked during Christmas with a hot cup of cocoa burning my palms.*

*My dad shook his head and watched her from his seat next to me. “I knew I loved her because I never stopped smiling since the day I met her.”*

*That was the answer I gave her too. The truth is- love rarely smiles. It beams and glows and it also cries and hurts, but it doesn’t smile. Smiling is boring. Love is not boring.*

*Then again what is love? I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve been in love.*

Dream’s feet pound on the treadmill as he runs. His headphones hit his chest, but nothing was playing from them since it was getting hard to hear the songs over his lingering thoughts, so he turned off his music and listened to his breathing. The treadmills were placed in front of a large glass window that displayed a closed off part of the beach and the white sand seemed brighter here. The ocean kissed the shore and Dream liked to imagine that the harder he ran, the faster he could sprint into the sea and forget all of this ever happened.

*My knee bounces as I sit and wait on the metal bench. I can feel stress sweat pool in my palms and I wipe them dry against my jeans as I wait for you. It was your first time in America. Your first time seeing me. I didn’t know why, but before I got out of my car, I made sure to check my reflection one final time before heading inside. Something I barely did for my own girlfriend.*

*I heard voices and my head snapped up, already looking for your smiling face in the crowd, and when I spotted you, I swear to you, George, I felt like I was going to throw up from suppressing my laughter. You looked so confused. You looked so lost on where you should go from there and the best part was that you made eye contact with me. You saw me, looked at me, then walked in the opposite direction.*

*“George!” I called to you and you turned. We made eye contact again and that’s when it clicked in your mind that it was me. I was there. You were there. We were together.*

*I’ll never forget that wild smile you had on your face as you jogged towards me with your dorky suitcase hitting your heels. Your smile was dangerous itself- like a wildfire that could burn me but it was too terrifyingly pretty to look away from.*

*I ran to you. You threw your suitcase down and ran to me and I remember letting my laughter loose at that, throwing my arms around you as you knocked the breath out of me. We were together, George.*

Dream’s stomach cramped up from running, but he can’t make himself stop. The memory freezes his mind and he finds himself spiraling further and further.

*When you met her, you were so nice. She said she liked your accent. You said you liked her shirt because you didn’t know what to respond with and I remember all of us laughing, but I know I was looking at you the whole time. Was it really that obvious?*

*Am I really that much of an idiot?*

*Don’t be an idiot.*

*Don’t be an idiot.*

...

*I'll fix this.*

Dream yanks at the emergency stop key and the treadmill comes to a fast halt, making him trip forward and earn himself weird looks from the two other guys here. Dream gives an awkward apology and he takes a minute to catch his breath. He tries to hide his pants with deep gulps of air, but his chest was moving too fast to hide the fact that Dream was upset. He could feel his throat get tight and his chest move quicker as he hyperventilated with memories and realizations stabbing his mind, and he stumbled off of the treadmill, grabbing the armbar for balance as he doubled over.

“You okay?” A guy calls. Dream just nods his head. He had no idea where that endurance came from.

*“Dream!” George giggled in his ear.*

*Stop,* Dream thought.

*“It’s our room, Dream,” George says.*

*Stop it.* Dream feels a phantom hand on his cheek. Sweat pours down his face.

*“It’s what you wanted, right?”*

*Stop. Stop, stop, stop, stop-*

*“Dream...” George whispers with those slender hands reaching to grab Dream’s hair as they lean in and-*

*STOP!* Dream screws his eyes shut and he feels like he's going to be sick everywhere.

*George doesn’t...he doesn’t like that,* Dream tells himself and he slowly stands upright. *He doesn’t like you. Do you even want that, Clay? Do you want him to like you?*

Dream’s legs are weak as he walks out of the gym, but he doesn’t go back to their room. Not yet.

Dream’s day comes full circle and he finds himself tearing down the beach, kicking up water and sand beneath him under the slowly setting sun. He hates running, but the burn of his legs and lungs in a nice change from the indecisive nature of his mind. It’s better than George’s lingering touch on his wrist and face.

*What do you want?*

*What do I want?*

Dream sees George’s face tilted to the summer sun behind his closed eyes.

*Do I want you, George?*

Dream remembers the hurt in George’s eyes when he says he wanted to be alone.

*Why were you hurt?*

*Why did I touch you then? Why did I have to sweep that eyelash off of your cheek?*

*Where are you now?*

Dream runs until he's so tired, his pace naturally becomes a fast walk, eventually giving in to dragging his bare feet in the sand. He was going to fix this. He had to talk to George and he had to clear things up and figure out what the hell was happening with him because if he didn't-

*I won't make up my mind about you,* Dream finished. He gazes out to the end of the beach and he can see rocks piled up and scattered out into the shallows of the ocean. Dream trips on a stray rock, wincing when he stubs his toe, but he finds himself standing heading straight to this weird place where the land meets the sea.

As warm water pools around his ankles, he stares out at the biggest tidal pool he's ever seen.

Silver fish dart around and he can see a few crabs shuffling on the bottom. Starfish grip onto large rocks that border the pool and Dream hikes through the shallow water, stepping over sharp rocks at the bottom. Seashells litter the floor, but Dream knows better than to pick them up.

*"This is a hermit crab shell," I had said, holding a tiny yellow shell to the camera.*

*"Hermit crabs live in that?"*

*"It's in the name, George," I responded, "another crab's trash is another's treasure."*

*"What."*

*"You know- once a crab gets too big for its shell, it moves into a bigger one."*

*"You're a nerd, you know that, right?"*

*"Every crab needs a home, George."*

*The look in your eyes was something else. Like you were longing for something, but you knew you didn't have it, so instead, you forced a grin and called me stupid.*

Dream stands on a gray rock in the middle of the pool and the high tide was able to keep his feet in the warm water, tiny waves tickling his skin. He stares out at the horizon as the sea breeze blows, sweeping up his t-shirt and sweaty hair, wrapping him in a chilled hug to remind him that it was here.

*We'll talk here.*

*I'll...* He didn't want to think it, so he let the thought die deep in his brain. He settles on: *We'll fix today right here.*

Now, he just needed to lure George out of his shell.

### **8:30 p.m**

Dream hated the wait, but he needed to make sure it was dark enough so George didn't realize that they were walking the wrong way to the floating dock.

George was back when Dream returned from his run, but neither of them talked- somehow mutually agreeing that they needed to give each other verbal space before Dream tried his little stunt. Which ended up being a lot harder than Dream realized. Every time he saw something remotely funny on Twitter, he would go to turn his phone, but then he would see George's back to him as an annoying reminder.

But now, after an awkward dinner in the dining hall with their phones covering their faces so they didn't have to look at each other, Dream finally got George where he wanted him.

"Hey..." He says, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder. "Isla told me earlier that they had a cool show on the floating dock...do you wanna go?"

George studied him for a second. "Do we-"

"No. No, cameras. Just us and the show."

Dream tries to hide a smile when George gives a single shrug- a definite George-way to say *sure, why not?*

But there was no show and the floating dock was getting further and further away as they walked in the dark, phone flashlights shining down on the black water.

"So...where'd you go?" Dream asks, turning around slightly. He was walking a few feet ahead of George to give his friend that distance and to guide him to the tidal pool.

George gives him a sheepish look. "The arcade. They had Pac-Man there."

"That's cool."

"Yeah..."

It was awkward, to say the least.

"So, what about you?" George questions. "What'd you do?"

"I ran and watched movies and stuff. It was pretty boring."

"You ran? Where to?"

"They had a gym and then I just ran on the beach for a bit."

"Interesting."

*No it's not*, Dream thought and he can see the shadows of rocks grow larger in the distance. "We're almost there."

He feels George kick water at him and Dream smiles to himself. George didn't seem to be mad anymore, just...quiet.

"Aw, darn," Dream says, pretending to kick at the water. "We went the wrong way! This isn't the floating dock."

George comes up next to him and looks at the tidal pool. He shrugs. "Okay, let's just turn around and go the other way."

"Or we could stay here?"

"It's not that far of a walk-"

Dream yanks him into the pool. "Just come on!"

George stumbles toward Dream and catches himself from falling by clinging to Dream's shoulders,

but he pulls away and gives Dream a small shove. “You idiot! You planned this, didn’t you?”

“I found this when I was running-”

*“You did!”*

“Of course I did! It’s a tidal pool, George, how could I not show you?”

George shakes his head. “Why did you have to lie about it?”

“I knew you wouldn’t willingly come unless it sounded interesting to you,” Dream admits and it was his turn to kick up water at George, spraying his friend’s shirt with dots. George goes silent as they stand in the water, looking at each other in the glow of their phone flashlights, and then his face turns towards the night sky.

*I need to say something. I have to.*

*“Aren’t you going to say something?” She asked, peering over my shoulder to read your message. You disappeared for days. This was the first day you came back and I remember reading your vague explanation about needing some time away. You left the day before my one year anniversary with her. Why didn’t I see the signs before?*

*“No,” I said.*

*Because at that time, I had nothing to say to you.*

*But now I do. I have so much I want to say and spill and I feel like I owe you the biggest apology for dragging you into this mess but...but how do I apologize to you?*

Dream turns his flashlight off and follows George’s eyes up to the sky. He was standing so still, he could feel fish dart around his feet in the water.

*What do I even apologize for? You still haven’t told me anything about what the hell is going through your mind. Should I start there? Would you even tell me?*

“George...” Dream says, mouth moving too fast for his brain. Words become a jumbled knot in his chest and mind, so he lets silence fill in his gap. George flicks off his flashlight and the stars become brighter, twinkling down in tiny dots on the waves in the tidal pool.

His heart flips when George moves, the shifting water sounding like a jackhammer in Dream’s head, and George stands on top of the rock Dream stood on just hours ago. Dream lets his gaze naturally fall on George in the darkness. He watches numbly as George stands on his tippy-toes like he was trying to get closer to the stars and Dream lets an amazed breath leave his mouth as George tilts his chin up with closed eyes, a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Remember when you counted my glow stars?” George asks.

*You do. You do remember.*

Dream’s hands tremble a bit and he hides them in his hoodie pocket. “Yeah?”

“How many did you count, Dream?” George’s eyes were still closed, but Dream knew that George was burning the sky into his mind.

“I stopped at twenty-six,” Dream half-lied. There were twenty-six stars, but that number was blown out of the water when Dream started counting George’s freckles and sleepy grins.



George nods and opens his eyes, the water unnaturally still. Low tide exposed starfish and barnacles on the rocks. The moonlight showed sharp rocks cutting through the water from the shallows out in the ocean like fingers coming up from the seafloor to grab at the salty air.

*I have to say something.*

Dream opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Fear of what he would say kept his words painfully clogged in his throat and as minutes scraped by them, Dream could feel the opportunity slip from his fingers. He could feel George building up his wall stronger- letting their friendship pass through in something so filtered, even Dream knew he didn't want that. And Dream wasn't sure what he wanted from George at all.

"What are you thinking?" Dream blurts suddenly. The pressure to fill the silence got to him. George doesn't say anything, but Dream can see him lower his gaze to the sea- a sign that he definitely heard Dream.

"Why do you want to know so bad?" George whispers just loud enough to be heard over the lap of the waves.

"Because I can't read your mind, George. Because even though we're here, together, I never know what you're thinking and I can't read you. Because I don't know what to say to you half of the time. Because I can't...I can't...because you're the only person that can say something but then somehow confuse me and I hate it, George. I hate that I can't read your mind," words are falling out of Dream's mouth at this point, "It's like...despite everything- I find myself constantly wondering what you're thinking. I look at you and all I can think is *what is he thinking about? And why can't he tell me?*"

George is looking at him with wide eyes and Dream looks out to the ocean.

"But then, there are these *moments*. Moments where for a split second, I can read you like an entire book and it's completely us and it makes me want-" *you. It makes me want you.* Dream squeezes his eyes shut. "Just- what are you thinking, George?"

"Did you know," George responds, pointing a finger to a star in the sky, "that the stars we're seeing now are actually years old?"

Dream shakes his head.

George smiles to himself, but it's sad. "It's like...by the time you see them, it's too late because the star could be burnt out already. We're just looking at something from the past, but despite everything, it still shines."

*What?* Dream thought, his face scrunching. *I word vomited all of that for a NASA factoid?*

"That's...cool," Dream responds.

"The stars are beautiful tonight," George comments. Dream turns his head to look at George, eyes tracing over his friend's hidden features in the dark, and he smiles to himself. *They are beautiful, aren't they?*

Dream watches the stars twinkle and spill into the ocean at their feet. "They're the brightest I've ever seen them," Dream agrees.

He feels George look at him, so he finally looks away.

Dream moves in the starry water like he was walking through the Milky Way. “I think only, like, seven percent of the ocean is explored,” he says and he bends down to peer into the hidden world of the tidal pool. A crab shuffles by his feet. “I wonder what sorta things are living in it?”

“You think too much.”

“I think just enough.”

“What if the things don’t want to be found?” George says and Dream finds the courage to look at his best friend in the eyes.

“I like to think that everything, eventually, wants to be found,” Dream responds and he remembers his dad’s words. “The most dangerous and misunderstood things are the prettiest and most loving.”

That colorful fizz breaks open again in Dream’s chest and the wind whispers in his ear, *You want to be found.*

George snorts, but it's gentle. “Okay, Socrates.”

“Are you going to tell me what you’re thinking?”

George hops down from his rock and water hits Dream’s cheek, but he doesn’t flinch, and he watches his friend wade over to him. The stars reflect in his dark eyes and Dream doesn’t look away as George comes closer so he can see mini galaxies spinning in George’s pupils. George smiles at him, any anger from today leaving his features and melting into something apologetic.

“I already did.”

*He’s here.*

*Reach out to him, Dream.*

*Pull him in.*

*Kiss him. Make the universe watch and the ocean feel it.*

Dream closes his eyes for a second and he keeps his hands in his pockets. He swore he felt George inch closer, but then when he opens his eyes, George is already walking away from him.

### **8:45 p.m**

The stars can be used to measure a lot of things- navigation, time, and even people’s personality. They can tell us who we’re supposed to love depending on what stars we were born under and that makes Dream think that maybe, those burning balls of gas, might be the very source of love.

The ocean gives planet earth the breath of life and accepts all and everything nature throws at it. Dream knew the ocean was powerful by itself- but he also knew that a majority of that power came from outer space. The ocean was powered with the universe’s love to change the tides and keep life thriving.

The ocean relied on the universe for power and the universe relied on the ocean for purpose.

As Dream followed George out of the tidal pool, low tide retreating further into the sea, he took a minute to look behind him and watch as the horizon blurs into nothing. No barrier to tell him where

earth ended and where space started.

Dream walks next to George with hands dangling by their side. They don't use their phone flashlights this time. The glow of the moon and resort guide them back.

He thinks about what George said the whole way back- about how the stars were old but still shine brightly despite being burnt out, and Dream thinks about how the ocean gives the universe a purpose. As Dream walks in silence, things slowly begin to settle in his mind and you know something?

George did tell Dream what he was thinking. In his own George-way.

In a way that only Dream could read and understand. An unspoken thought manifesting itself into a star as George's words flutter up to the universe and shine brightly next to the old stars. George needed Dream just like how the universe needed the ocean. George was sorry.

Dream's hand reaches out to George, his skin jumping with electricity as their knuckles brush, and Dream hooks George's pinky with his.

Then George's walls crumbled.

George twists his hand and forces Dream's fingers apart, smooth skin sending heat and voltage to Dream's core as he locks their fingers together. It takes Dream a second to snap out of his surprised daze and he smiles as he secures George's hand in his, running a comforting thumb on the back of his friend's hand. It was a seal so strong, not even the ocean's current or the universe's gravity could rip apart.

They needed each other.

## Chapter End Notes

i finished this chapter on 2/14/2021 and my editor, @honkshyguy, can verify that and i have tweets to prove that i finished on that day. i did not steal from a dono- ive had this original metaphor in my head for weeks. if you comment anything saying how i referenced a stream or dono, i will cry. ik dream got a dono telling the burnt out star fact. but pls. pls let me have this.

((/lh))

Chapter Notes

43 google doc pages of dream being a mega simp lawl

June 17

?:??

*"It's raining again, Dream."*

*Dream looks to his friend standing in the middle of the tidal pool, stars glistening on his cheeks in the blackness around them. Dream couldn't hear or see the rain this time, but he could feel it pelt his skin harder than before and he wipes his cheek and stares at his wet palm.*

*"What is it, George?"*

*"What's what?"*

*"The rain."*

*George laughs and it sounds like the slow turn of the moon. "Wouldn't you like to know, ocean boy?"*

*"Ocean boy? That's new."*

*"I figured you could use a new nickname."*

*"Better than pissbaby- that's for sure," Dream comments and he gazes out to George who seemed to be getting further away from him. He feels the invisible rain hit harder and it doesn't burn anymore. In fact, Dream's skin seemed to drink up the rainwater and his body craved to feel the drops. "Why is it raining?"*

*"It's always been raining, idiot, it just started to fall harder for you."*

*"Like you?"*

*George smiles. "Is that what you want to believe?"*

*"I..." Dream hesitates and he watches a Blacktip shark swim over their heads. "I don't know. Why can't you be helpful for once?"*

*"I'm always helpful."*

*"You can't even give me a straight answer in a dream, so, no. I would beg to differ, George."*

*"But doesn't the rain feel nice?"*

*"Why are you going away?" Dream asks, wading in the tidal pool closer to where George once stood. Every step he took to George, his friend seemed to move two steps back. "Stop moving*

*away.”*

*“It feels nice, right?”*

*Dream’s hair sticks to his forehead and he crosses his arms, shivering against the cold. It was refreshing and each drop felt like ecstasy in his veins, kickstarting his heart and sending turquoise lighting bolts to his brain. His skin didn’t reject the rainwater anymore. No red welts formed on his arm and no hot air suffocated him.*

*“It does.”*

*“You love it, don’t you?” George says and suddenly he’s right in front of Dream with those star freckles blinking up at him. George looked so unearthly in front of Dream- like he was born from a star. Dream’s eyes hurt staring at him, but he refuses to look away as he reaches for George’s hands.*

*“Tell me what it is.”*

*“You really haven’t figured it out?”*

*“I can barely figure you out.”*

*“Fair enough,” George whispers, “but I just thought it would be so obvious by now.”*

*“Maybe it is.”*

*“Do you really want to discover something as hidden as yourself, ocean boy?”*

*“Why are you talking like that? Can’t you just tell me what the rain means so I can wake up peacefully this time?”*

*“Okay, okay- relax, Dream,” George says and he takes Dream’s hand in his with fingers holding onto his hand like George was scared to lose him in the dark. “You were scared of the rain before.”*

*“You say that like it's a fact.”*

*“It is, isn’t it?” George says and he guides Dream through the tidal pool.*

*“I dunno. I don’t think so. I think I just wasn’t used to it before,” Dream responds.*

*“Now you’re getting it!”*

*“Thanks,” Dream says dryly, “I’m a fast learner.”*

*George turns to him. “A modest one too.”*

*“Why do I keep coming back here?” Dream asks. George doesn’t give any sign of hearing him.*

*George, instead, stands on his tippy-toes and gets as close as he can to Dream without touching him. Dream naturally dips down and touches their foreheads together like he’s done it a million times and George giggles. Pale hands flutter his to his jaw and turn his face, breaths mingling and tickling each other's lips and it was killing Dream. His stomach flutters when George edges closer to him with their bottom lips grazing.*

*Dream’s rain turns into a waterfall over his head as it pounds down on him harder than before.*

*“Doesn’t it kill you too?” George whispers into Dream’s mouth. George’s fingertips make his skin sizzle. “Come on, Dream. Just admit it already...”*

*The words are on his tongue and he moves his mouth like he was going to, but instead, he clenches his teeth and ducks his head away slightly. “I can’t.”*

*But George’s hands yank his face back and God- Dream was going to die right there because of the star that was touching him. George seemed to glow softly as he talks right against Dream’s lips with a knowing smile, “All stars burn out eventually and all things hidden will be discovered..”*

*“Tick tock, Dreamie.”*

## **11 a.m**

“You’re not very helpful, are you?” Dream hisses as he yanks the stupid looking sun hat off of George’s head, leaving his friend’s brown hair a mess.

George yanks it back. “We’ve been walking around for ages. Where even are we?”

“I dunno,” Dream says, “definitely somewhere in Key Largo.”

“Oh, look who’s the helpful one now.”

“Me because I’m the one who got us here in the first place *without* getting us lost or late.”

“Late?” George repeats. “Dream, how could we be late? Isla said the stupid photo shoot was at five?”

“Yeah?”

“Five p.m. As in past morning. As in the evening-”

“I know what p.m means, George,” Dream says. He moves around the small surf shop as George puts the sunhat back on the mannequin head. The place was filled with racks of cheap t-shirts and swimsuits and little souvenirs, but Dream had to give it to this shop- they had a good business running. For the twenty minutes they’ve been wandering around, there’s been a steady stream of people coming in and out. Mainly tourists who needed emergency swim trunks and sunscreen.

“What are we going to do while we wait? Drive around some more?” George asks.

“No, I Googled some places we could stop by if we got bored-”

“Well, I’m bored right now. We should go.”

“Can we keep looking around for a second? I’m looking for one of the disposable cameras.”

George shakes his head. “You still want one?”

Dream mentioned getting one this morning since his phone camera roll barely had enough storage to save a new contact, so he figured buying a cheap camera would be a better alternative than relying on his memory for pictures. While they’ve been driving down Key Largo towards the small beach town they were supposed to meet Isla at, Dream was stopping at every tourist shop they passed by. Some had cameras, but they were either too cheap to trust or- in the case of one store- just empty boxes with the camera stolen out of them. George was getting annoyed with Dream’s

hunt at this point.

“You only go to the Keys once in your life,” Dream says, eyes scanning shelves.

“You live, like, six hours away- if anything *I’m* only going once in my life.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a reason to come here again.”

“So, what?” George scoffs. “I was your ticket?”

Dream shrugs. “Pretty much.”

George’s eyes widen a bit, but then Dream spots the golden shelf with cameras lined neatly on it, and he darts to it.

Ever since their weird talk last night, Dream noticed that George decided to drop whatever anger he had towards Dream and Dream was loving it. He missed having this laidback version of George and it was nice to not have to worry about crossing a line when the threat of Isla was constantly around the corner. George was open again and so completely, utterly *George*.

“The suns bright,” George says once they step outside and he squints up to the blue sky.

“You’re a genius, George- staring directly at it and all,” Dream snips as he unlocks the rental car with the camera box under his arm.

“No, the true genius here baited their friend into visiting America and then forced them to be their fake boyfriend for a week,” George responds. Once they get in the car, Dream twists to him in his seat with his eyebrow raised.

“I wonder who would do that.”

“I just told you- a genius would.”

Dream jams the keys into the ignition. “Call me Einstein then.”

“Oh, so you admit it was a dumb idea?”

“I never said it was a good one.”

“You totally did!” George cries as they pull away from the shop. “You were like ‘Come on, George it’s a free vacation with an all-you-can-eat buffet-’ which I have yet to see, by the way.”

Dream laughs and shakes his head. “You’re so dumb. The buffet is in the dining hall and I *never* said that.”

“Shut up! You did! You said it, like, a million times!”

“Mmm- nope. Don’t remember.”

“You did!”

“You can’t prove anything that I said, George,” Dream says. George throws himself against the window in a dramatic eye roll.

“I know you said it.”

“Okay, well, do you have proof? Did you record it? Draw it? Write it? Did somebody else write it down?”

“...No, but this whole thing is something straight out of a book- does that count?”

“Not even close,” Dream responds and he flicks on a blinker to turn into the town. “So, how do I know you’re not just making that up?”

“Because I’m not, Dream!” George says, throwing his hands up.

“Sounds like you are.”

“You’re such an idiot. I actually hate you,” George mumbles. Dream parks the car and grabs the camera again, tearing the box open, and ripping the plastic off with his teeth. “Dream? What are you doing?”

“Okay, repeat after me-”

“This can’t be good.”

“Trust me,” Dream says and he turns his body fully to George, his cheeks aching from a grin. “Repeat this: The Florida Keys are fun.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Say it.”

“No! Dream-”

“Say. It.”

George sighs. “The Florida Keys are fun.”

As soon as the words leave George’s mouth, Dream lifts the camera and snaps a picture of George mid-sentence with a horrendous expression and Dream bursts out laughing.

“Dream!”

“I can’t wait to see how that photo turned out.”

George reaches for the small green camera. “Give it! Delete it, Dream-”

“You can’t delete it!” Dream cries and he holds the camera away from his grabby friend. “Now that’ll be evidence of you saying how much fun you’re having. That’s evidence, George.”

“No, because I could’ve been saying literally anything-”

“Well, good thing I have,” Dream checks the photo count, “nineteen more pictures to take!”

“Of what?”

“Of you having fun.”

“You’re building evidence against me?”

“I’m tired of you always complaining about not having fun, so I’m going to prove to you that this is fun, okay?” Dream says with a small smile. George tilts his head at Dream slightly in disbelief.



“What? Oh come on, George, you are totally having fun.”

“Because you make it fun, Dream.”

“Then I’m just here to capture it.”

George is quiet for a moment, studying Dream with a hidden softness in his eyes before he grins.

“What are you waiting for then?”

Dream raises the camera to his eyes and the flash makes George’s face glow even brighter.

### **11:23 a.m**

In all honesty, Dream didn’t have a plan. Well, he *did* have one, but it was more of a plan to cover up the fact that he didn’t even have one to begin with.

“Keep them closed, George.”

“They are closed!”

“What was the store's color?”

George shrugs one shoulder. “Which one?”

“The one we just walked by?”

“Why do you wanna know?” George asks with his arms braced out in front of him, swinging in a slow circle around him to make sure he didn’t run into the clutter on the sidewalk. Flower pots, tables, bikes, cars, trash cans, benches, stands- practically everything in human existence clung to the sides of the shop or the very edge of the already narrow sidewalk. Dream was walking just a few paces behind his blind friend, making sure he didn’t run into anything, while also desperately googling activities for them to do.

“I’m making sure your eyes are closed. It’s been a while since you’ve kicked a flower pot,” Dream responds. He shuffles out of a trash can’s way.

“I’m just getting good at-” George’s foot catches on the leg of a metal chair and he stumbles.

“You wanna finish that thought?”

His friend sighs. “No.”

“Keep heading straight, idiot,” Dream laughs. He looks back to his phone and watches as the blue line on his GPS shortens with each step they take. *Almost there.*

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going now?”

Dream lifts his head for a second, making eye contact with a group of people walking in George’s warpath, and he grabs his friend, yanking him to the side. “No, because you’re gonna roll your eyes and call it stupid and you won’t go.”

“Because if you picked it, it *has* to be stupid. Why’d we even stop?”

“People,” Dream answers just as the group walks by them. He gives George a shove forward to

keep him walking. "I'll give you a hint: it's somewhere in Key Largo."

"That was such a good hint, Dream. That narrows the number down to the thousands," George says sarcastically, looking at Dream through his closed eyes.

"Eyes forward, you're gonna run into another bike," George sidesteps when his sneaker gently kicks the wheel, "plus, I could've said somewhere in America. Or the world."

"You're so generous," George quips back.

"Thank you! I did get us a free vacation to one of the prettiest places on Earth."

"I think an alleyway in New York could do better."

"Have you been to New York?" Dream asks.

"Nope."

"Then shut up and keep walking."

George groans and drags his feet slightly, but he keeps walking and that's all that Dream wanted. So far, he's found one other place that they could stop by and hopefully it would kill enough time until Isla sends him the fateful text that she was ready for them on the beach.

Because of that dream, Dream's day was completely thrown off and he was unprepared for everything. He woke up late, later than George, and woke up to a text message from their guide reminding them that they had the scheduled photoshoot today at 5. In a panicked and disorientated state from the dream (and from George waking him up by slamming a pillow into his face), Dream misread the text. He thought the 5 was an 8 and thought she meant 8 in the morning since he couldn't remember what time they agreed on. So Dream practically shoved George out the door, his shirt half on, and he made a beeline to their car.

It wasn't until George read the message that Dream realized that he misread everything and now he was stuck with six hours to kill until Isla actually needed them. That's when he made the excuse that he had a big day on the town plan and they needed to leave early for a camera. In a way, it wasn't a lie- Dream did want a camera, but there was no big day.

"Okay! Open your eyes, Georgie," Dream says and he stands in front of his friend.

"I don't know if I want to, to be honest."

"Oh, come on, you were complaining about having them closed before."

George shrugs and he reaches a blind hand out to the building to lean against it, but his hand swipes at air and George awkwardly lets his hand fall to his side. "I got used to not seeing. All my other senses are sharpened."

"Doubt it. Can you just open your eyes now? It's hot out here and you're taking forever to-"

"Okay, okay! Fine, I'll open them."

Dream watches as George opens one brown eye in fear. Once he realizes that he was just standing in front of a wooden building that was painted a bright teal, he relaxes.

"What is this place?" George asks, squinting against the sun as he reads the sign. "'Shark Shore Aquarium and Pet Store?' Dream, why are we here?"

“It’s an aquarium!”

“Okay?”

Dream rolls his eyes and he puts a hand on the glass door. “It’s gonna be fun. Trust me.”

“You said to trust you when I first got in the airplane to fly here and look where we are now.”

“And you’re having *fun*.”

“Hardly.”

“No, you totally admitted it back in the car,” Dream says and he pulls open the door, giving George no choice but to walk in. He nods his head to the building when George doesn’t move at first, trying to convince him to walk in. “C’mon, Georgie. It’s hot out here and cool in there.”

With the promise of air conditioning, George takes slow steps towards the door until he stands in the doorway, peering in like Dream was lying about it being an aquarium and it was some torture chamber instead.

“It’s really small for an aquarium, Dream.”

“Just go in!” Dream snaps and he kicks the back of George’s thigh so his friend is shoved deep into the building.

### **11:45 a.m**

It wasn’t an aquarium.

Turns out, the places *sold* aquariums to put the pets in. Or at least that’s what Dream figured out during their time of wandering around the building. Dream, when he typed ‘aquariums in key largo’ into the Google Search bar, didn’t even think to check if it was a legit aquarium and not a place that sold the glass tanks.

Dream flicks the glass and fish scatter. “Sorry,” he mutters to George.

“It’s fine. I mean, I guess it’s still cool, right?” George says, trying to hide the fact that he was already bored with the place. Dream gives him a look. “I’m trying, Dream.”

“I know,” Dream sighs and he leans against the tanks, watching George pace up an aisle and pick up random cups of fish food. “It just sucks because I thought this would actually be something to do.”

“It would be something to do if we wanted to buy a fish.”

“I guess.”

“Do you want to buy a fish?”

“Not really.”

Dream didn’t mean to be dry with his responses, but he felt bad for this morning and for making George walk blocks with his eyes closed to come stalk around some random store that smelled like seafood and cleaner. George was trying, finally, to make the most out of things, though. After their

talk last night, his friend was putting a bit more effort into being open. It wasn't much, but Dream appreciated the attempt.

"Yeah, I guess this does kinda suck," George says. *Exhibit A of George really speaking his mind*, Dream thought to himself and he kicks at a dust bunny on the floor.

"That's on me."

George walks back to him and stands next to Dream, pressing his back lightly against the fish tanks like he was scared he was going to shatter them. "Don't worry about it, seriously."

"I don't know what we're gonna do," Dream admits and George laughs.

"I know, Dream, you're not very good at lying," *Oh, you have no idea, do you, George?* "But I'm sure we'll find something."

"I mean, maybe." He can feel George studying the side of his face, and as much as Dream tried to convince himself he shouldn't be scared of George's curious looks, when he does look at his friend, his heart races. "What?"

"Nothing," George says. A beat of silence, then, "Well, I think you're being too hard on yourself about this."

"I'm not being hard on-"

"You totally are! You have that Dream look on your face- the one you make when you're thinking way too hard about something and since I know you-"

"Sadly."

George smiles and Dream's palms get sweaty. "Unfortunately," he agrees, "but, I know you, and I know you're thinking way too hard about some pet shop in Key Largo."

"I made you walk four blocks with your eyes closed."

"My hearing is great now," George jokes.

"But I-"

"Let it go, Dream. I really don't care what we do."

"You never do."

George's eyes move to the floor for a second, his smile slipping into something softer. "Maybe I do, maybe I don't."

It was Dream's turn to study George because there were so many words behind that single phrase and all of them came crashing into each other in Dream's brain. He couldn't pinpoint exactly what George meant by 'maybe', but he knew that the phrase was going to eat him alive for the rest of the day.

Before Dream could even come to some sort of conclusion, George moves on. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

“The Dream look. Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything! I’m looking at you,” Dream says. George rolls his eyes and grabs the sides of Dream’s face, giving it a gentle shake.

“Stop. It. Stop thinking.”

Dream laughs and pulls George’s hands off, but he holds onto them. “Okay, okay! I’m not thinking! Just thinking about...” *You.*

*You on my couch with the red mark on your cheek from the armrest. You in the water yesterday with the sun staining your skin. You with your hands that fit so perfectly in mine and how you’re the perfect height for me to wrap my arms around you so I can lean down and-*

“About what?” George prompts.

“The color white.”

George gives a small laugh. “What?”

“I mean, it’s impossible to think of nothing so I just imagined the color white.”

“You’re dumb.”

Dream throws George’s hands back at him and he pushes himself off of the wall. “Says the guy that told me to stop thinking.”

“Well it was either that or telling you to stop looking at me,” George responds.

“Why? Did you want me to keep looking at you?”

George’s mouth falls open before closing, then opening again in a struggle to defend his words. “So what if I did?”

Dream didn’t know what answer he expected but was not that. *Definitely* not that.

Dream gawks. “What?”

“What?”

“What’d you say, George?”

“I think you heard me,” George says and his voice is stern. *He’s doing the thing again*, Dream realized and he shakes his head at his friend. *He’s not backing down, but he knows what he said was stupid. And now he’s gonna walk away or pretend like it didn’t happen, right?*

George pushes past him to the door and Dream dips his head. Just like George said, as much as it sucked, they knew each other almost too well, and they knew all the little things the other did, too.

Dream has one foot out the door behind George when the woman’s head snaps up and she rushes out from behind the counter.

“Wait!” She calls. “I’m sorry- I just overheard you guys talking about an aquarium and I know it doesn’t look very big, but this *is* an aquarium.”

George, who was standing outside, pokes his head back in. “It is?”

“Yeah, you mean the tanks, right?” Dream responds to the woman. She shakes her head.

“No...I take it you boys aren’t locals?”

Dream jabs a thumb behind him to George. “He’s definitely not and I live up by Orlando.”

“Oh, where are you from?” She asks, taking interest in George.

“London,” George answers. Dream feels George shrink behind him a bit from the sudden attention.

She smiles and her tan skin wrinkles. “Ah, a bit far from home, hm?”

Dream looks down to George, waiting for him to answer so they could move on and figure out what this woman wanted, but George was already looking at him with eyes roaming around his face. Dream smiles at him.

He swears he saw George’s cheeks burn rose.

George ducks his head and gives a small shrug. “Not really.”

“What?” Dream says. He didn’t even realize he spoke until everyone’s eyes were on him now and he puts his hands in the pockets of his shorts. “I mean,” he coughs, “you’re across the Atlantic and three hours from mainland.”

“You know, sometimes home isn’t necessarily a place,” the woman says.

*I don’t think that’s what he meant,* Dream thought to her. *George is just messing around.*

Dream finds George’s eyes again. His friend refuses to look at them, his lips pressed together and not denying her words or confirming Dream’s thought.

*You are messing around, right, George?*

“Anyways!” The woman claps and she ushers them back in the store. “Come back in, please, if I knew you boys were looking for the aquarium, I would’ve taken you back to it.”

“So, there *is* an aquarium here?” George asks.

Dream nods. “That’s what she said, yeah.”

“I told you that you were being too hard on yourself.”

“You told me to stop thinking and then you shook my head around,” Dream says. The woman grabs the key from her counter, still ushering wildly to get the boys to follow, and they didn’t really have a choice but to follow her.

“I also said you were being too hard.”

“No, I don’t remember that.”

George shoves him, a giggle escaping his lips. “You’re such an idiot.”

“Where are you boys staying?” The woman asks, interrupting Dream’s harsh response to George.

“Oh, um,” *Here we go,* “The Moonlight Resort,” Dream answers.

She stops walking and she turns around to look at them, dark eyes moving from Dream to George.  
“That new couple’s resort?”

“Yeah.” Dream hated having this conversation.

“That makes a lot more sense,” she says and Dream physically reels back in bewilderment.

George seemed surprised too, but he’s calmer with it. Instead, his voice breaks as he says,  
“What?”

“I hate to assume things, but I got that feeling that you were together.”

“Ooh,” Dream hisses out. He looks at George and he can see his friend’s features stiffen in visible discomfort. Dream looks back to the woman. *Isla’s not here.* “No, we’re just friends.”

“Excuse me?” The woman says.

“Dream?” George whispers.

Dream steps forward a bit. “We booked a room there without really looking at what the resort was. Well, I booked it, I guess,” he laughs through his teeth, “but when we got there, we realized what it was and it was a weird mistake...so, yeah. Just friends.”

The woman’s face lights up in understanding and her face flushes. “Ah, well, I’m sorry for assuming. The aquarium is right this way.”

She goes back to leading them and Dream starts to walk, but George clamps a hand around his forearm.

“Why’d you do that?” He asks in a low voice.

“Because we aren’t with Isla or at the resort?”

George’s eyes harden with a brick wall quickly building in them and they turn cold despite the grateful smile on his face. “Thanks.”

“No...problem...” Dream says slowly. Okay, now he was confused. “I just thought you would want a break from-”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. Thank you.”

George walks in front of him and pulls him to the back of the store to catch up with the woman. Dream watches his sandals scuff on the floor.

*For days, he’s been complaining about us being ‘us.’ Did he expect us to still act when we were alone? No, obviously not, Clay, don’t be an idiot- you never acted when you were alone before.*

Memories of the golf course shimmer in his brain and he remembers placing his hat on top of George’s head. Something that was meant to be a polite gesture seemed so affectionate now and they were alone then. The images of their days start to blend together: dancing around the air hockey table together when no one was around, hiking up the lighthouse with soft smiles, standing in the hot tub with their bodies naturally drawn together like magnets, hands finding each other in the starry night- they weren’t acting then. Isla was never around and they didn’t *have* to act those times, even if they were under other people’s eyes. All of those moments were completely them. Completely Dream. Completely George.

Dream's skin pricks with sweat in the air-conditioned building as he stares at the back of George's head.

He knows what he's feeling.

Dream knows.

The racing heart, the stomach pain, the nerves, the blushes, the shy glances.

The colorful pop. The *rain*- God, he knew what the dreams meant now.

It was- *No*. He didn't even want to think the word because that made it real and it wasn't. It couldn't be.

Dream squeezes his eyes shut and he lets George guide him. It was his turn to be blind.

*No. No, I promised. I promised him.*

When he opens his eyes, they're standing in front of a heavy black curtain and the woman has a hand ready to draw it back.

"You boys ready? It isn't much, but it's still an aquarium, right?" She gives a small laugh and she yanks the curtain back.

Taking a few steps inside, Dream was surprised to see what a small building could hide. Inside the room, a large glass tank took up one side of the wall and the room glowed turquoise and a small velvet bench sat against the opposite wall. Posters and plaques of animals off the Keys' coast fill the walls. It was a small space since the tank took up a large part of the room, but hundreds of tiny fish and Bonnethead sharks swam in the water. Coral littered the tank floor and reached high for the lights above the tank. It was quiet and peaceful- a little chunk of the underwater world for them to see.

They sit on the bench and watch the fish for a few minutes, listening to the hum of the water filter and the quiet movement of water.

Dream couldn't focus. The tropical fish a blurred rainbow in his eyes.

"This is a pretty sad aquarium," George comments.

"Eh, better than nothing," Dream responds, trying to keep his panicked voice steady, "I'm just glad I didn't get ripped off by Google."

"Maybe we'll have a better time with the other places."

"Why? Bored already?"

George shakes his head and he leans forward to the tank, colorful blobs of color from the fish reflecting on his face. "Nope."

Dream works up enough strength to look at George and admire his friend's tinted skin and his hands find his camera.

"Don't move," Dream commands in a soft voice. George doesn't move but his eyes flick to the camera aimed at him.

Dream snaps a picture and the flash makes the fish scatter. It didn't take long for them to continue



on with their contained life- returning to their schools with Bonnetheads wiggling their way through them.

“Got it?” George asks.

“No idea. We’ll find out eventually.”

George lifts a finger to the glass and a clownfish swims up to it in curiosity. George laughs and he looks at Dream.

There’s another flash and the clownfish swims away.

“Dream!” George cries and he snatches the camera. “You made the fish go away.”

“It was an accident!” *No, it wasn’t.* “My finger slipped.”

“Whatever,” his friend says.

“Can I have the camera back?”

“No, you’re gonna scare the fish again.”

Dream sighs and turns to the tank with his empty hands clamping the edge of the bench. George holds the camera and Dream tries not to note how George had a finger ready on the capture button.

“Hey,” Dream says and he moves to the front of the tank, sitting on the freezing floor. “Watch this.”

George raises an eyebrow in curiosity and Dream wiggles his fingers in front of the glass, drawing the attention of green and blue fish. A surgeonfish swims right next to his ear and he grins.

“Ready?”

“Dream, I’ve been ready, and I still have no idea what you’re doing.”

Dream turns forward again and he sucks his cheeks in, mimicking the mouth of the surgeonfish beside him and George’s face crumples into something amused and scared.

“You look like a dumbass right now,” George says, holding back laughter. “What the hell are you doing?”

Dream relaxes his face long enough to say, “I’m a fish.”

George is kind enough to chuckle at his dumb joke and as soon as Dream made his fish face again, a flash burns his pupils and purple dots wiggle in his vision. He can hear the water move behind him from the fish racing away. He rubs his eyes.

“That’s gotta be the greatest picture to exist,” George says.

“Okay, come on, I didn’t take any embarrassing photos of you-”

“You did! In the car, remember? Literally the first picture you took.”

Dream smiles. “Doesn’t count, I was testing it out.”

“Well, it's not like we can delete it, can we?”

“No.”

“Bummer,” George shrugs, “I guess we both have blackmail to use against each other when these get printed out.”

“You’re so dumb.”

“You fell right into it. You let me have the camera.”

“You took it from me!”

George shrugs again. “Okay? You could’ve gotten it back.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Fighting me for it,” George says.

Dream shakes his head. “No chance. I have, like, three feet on you, I would totally win.”

“Shut up, Dream! You have *maybe* an inch on me-”

“What?! No way!”

“Plus I’m quicker than you, I would worm my way away from you.”

Dream makes a face. “Worm? Doubt it.”

George holds the camera mockingly in front of him, a smile on his face. Dream thumps his head against the glass, unbothered by George’s bait. However, George was smart. As much as he was an idiot, he sometimes had a good plan to get Dream to bite. That’s why when George snaps another picture of Dream leaning against the glass, Dream shoots forward and grabs at the green camera in George’s hands.

“Wait!” George exclaims. “I wasn’t ready!”

“You should’ve thought about that before you took another picture!”

George screeches as Dream pries the camera from his fingers, but George turns away so his back was to Dream’s chest. George tucks the camera into his stomach to protect it.

“Give it, George!”

“No! You took pictures of me!”

“That’s the whole point of the camera!”

Dream wraps his arms around George and kneels on the bench, fighting to get the camera away from George’s body. Eventually, George elbows Dream in the stomach and that makes Dream back off for a second, but Dream wasted no time grabbing George’s exposed wrist and yanking it up and away from his stomach. The camera was in his grip and Dream uses his free hand to yank it out of

his friend's hand.

George was panting and his eyes were wild. "You're crazy!"

"I told you to give me the camera!"

"You're hurting my wrist! Let go!" George says and Dream comes down from the adrenaline, letting go of George's wrist so quickly, George's wrist fell to his side with a fast *whoosh*.

With the camera safely in his short pocket, Dream lets out a breath. "You okay?"

"I feel like I was just attacked by my six-foot friend."

"So, no?"

George rolls his eyes and runs a hand through his ruffled hair. "Don't flatter yourself. You had the element of surprise."

"Oh, come on now-"

"Don't 'Oh, come on now,' me! You literally lunged at me like a feral animal."

Dream opens his mouth to respond, and the woman flies into the room. "Are you boys okay?! I heard fighting."

"We're fine," Dream says. "We were just talking."

"Talking, right," she says. She notices that the tank was fine, so she relaxes a bit. "Did you like the aquarium?"

"It was fun," George says. Dream nods.

"Very."

Her smile is shaky. "That's great! Don't you boys have other places to explore, though? The town has a lot of little shops to check out, no use in...um...staying here."

Taking the hint, George and Dream left. George makes another snag for the camera, but Dream is quick to move out of the way, giving George a shove forward and out of the store.

*He said it was fun.*

Dream smiles and the sky got bluer.

### 12:30 p.m

"Jeez, did I do that?" Dream asks, leaning across the rickety metal table.

George looks down at his wrist. "It's almost like you attacked me, Dream."

"I didn't- okay, but I wasn't *that* aggressive," Dream responds. He reaches out and traces the red marks from his fingers on George's pale skin. The skin around them was turning a light yellow from bruising and Dream winces. "Sorry."

"It's fine, it doesn't hurt." George lets Dream trace the red splotches for another second before he

tugs his wrist back.

“I didn’t realize-”

“It’s cool, Dream, seriously. We were just messing around.”

“Right,” Dream agrees dryly.

They were walking for a while and they decided to sit down since it was getting way too hot out. The sun made Dream’s skin numb with heat and his tan deepened. George’s cheeks turned pink again, but the sunscreen seemed to be holding up well enough to make his friend’s skin a peachy color instead of red.

“If you really feel bad, you can kiss my wrist to make it feel better?” George offers, holding it back out. Dream laughs and shoves it away from his face.

“I would rather lick the table.”

“Do it then.”

“What? George, I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t. Lick the table, Dream.”

Dream leans back in his chair and kicks at George’s feet under the table. “You’re so weird.”

“You like it,” George says.

“Whatever you gotta tell yourself.”

So far, Dream has been handling his emotions pretty well considering the fact he came to an abrupt realization. He’s been able to keep his poker face on for George, but any second he would turn away, Dream would retreat back into his head with a hammering heart and anxiety kicking his gut. He kept telling himself that they had three days left together. Three days left with George and the act, and then he would be free. He would go back to his house in Florida and he’ll recover from all of this. George would go back to England and he’ll never have to know that Dream broke his promise and things will be fine.

It’ll be fine.

*Three days. Just three more days.*

*Tick tock, Dreamie,* dream George’s voice echoed in his head. Dream looks up at the sun to burn his eyes, the pain distracting his mind from remembering the dream.

*I got it,* Dream thought as a wispy cloud floated in his vision. *I got it under control. It’s all in my hands.*

That didn’t make him feel better.

“Hey, can we get something to eat? I’m hungry,” George asks. Dream looks at George with black spots in his eyes from staring at the sun.

“Yeah, that’s the next place we’re going.”

“Why are we sitting here then?”

Dream shrugs one shoulder. “Killing time, I guess.”

“Killing time by pondering deep thoughts, huh?” George jokes.

“Very deep thoughts.”

George laughs like it was the funniest joke he’s ever heard. But Dream didn’t laugh.

### 1 p.m

Dream’s sandals were practically melting against the pavement as he followed the blue line on Google Maps.

“Do I have to close my eyes again?” George asks.

“No,” Dream says, “unless you want to?”

George squeezes by a bench. “No, I’m good.”

Dream snorts and continues to lead them to the smoothie shack. According to the reviews, it was the greatest smoothie place in Key Largo and they had all sorts of food to eat. However, it did have a reputation for being kind of pricey, but Dream figured ‘pricey’ was just eight dollars for a smoothie.

As they near a bright pink building with a small window popped open, Dream turns to George.

“What are you craving?”

George thought for a moment. “Fries?”

“Fries are good.”

Dream holds open the door for George, giving a dramatic bow that makes George laugh. When they stand in line, Dream finally realizes what ‘pricey’ means.

“Holy shit- *twelve dollars* for a smoothie?!” Dream gasps.

“It’s ten dollars for fries,” George reads.

“That is such bullshit- is this place really that good?”

“Dream, it’s fine-”

“I’m not dropping...” Dream does the math in his head, “thirty-four dollars for two smoothies and fries.”

“Okay, so I’ll buy my smoothie and fries and-”

“You’re not getting ripped off either, George.”

As the line grows shorter, Dream comes to a solution. “We’ll share.”

George blinks at him. “Share?”

“We’ll share a smoothie and fries.”

"I would rather lick the table than share a smoothie with you," George says sharply and Dream flicks his forehead.

"Don't steal my joke," Dream says. "I mean, why can't we share?"

"It's a rule, remember?"

*Ooh, right. It was.* Dream looks back up to the prices and then to his friend. "Can you suck it up for one day?"

"Dream!"

"It's thirty-four dollars! I'm not--"

"You're not?! I'm not sharing a drink with you and getting your gross spit--"

"How can I help you guys?" The employee says, putting a halt to their arguing. Dream turns to her and George shakes his head.

"One strawberry-banana smoothie and a plate of fries."

"*Two* smoothies," George corrects.

"One smoothie," Dream insists, not looking at him. The employee looks between them and then she makes the smart choice to follow the guy who was going to pay for the food.

"Okay...one smoothie and fries?"

"*Yes.*"

"No!" George cries.

Dream shoves the money into her hand as George protests and once the receipt is pressed into his hands, Dream quickly dodges George's shove and stands off to the side to wait for their things.

"Dream, it was a rule!"

"A dumb one! It's not like we're kissing or anything!" Dream says and George groaned in embarrassment, rubbing his face. "Look--" Dream plucks two black paper straws from the container on the counter, "We'll get two straws. Two separate ones."

George doesn't say anything and when they get their food, Dream puts their straws in the pink drink and holds it to George.

"I hate you," George says, but he takes it.

"I know."

George takes a small sip from his straw and wrinkles his nose. "Oh my God."

"It's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"Give it."

"Don't drink out of my straw!" George reminds him unhelpfully.

Dream takes a sip out of his straw and his mouth explodes with a heavenly sweetness that makes his stomach cool. "I wouldn't dream of it. Hold the fries, weirdo."

They walk down the street and find a bench in the shade, the palm leaves swaying quietly in a practically nonexistent breeze. Their smoothie was melting fast in the heat and eventually, George gave up his fight with sharing it, and the two took turns taking quick sips. Dream thought it would be funny to pretend to drink all of it, making direct eye contact with George as he kept his mouth on the straw, but all it earned him was a fry in the forehead and George saying that he knew Dream was pretending. It earned him nothing but salt and grease on his face.

George knew him too well.

"What's next on your list?" George says through a mouthful of salty fries and sweet smoothie.

"Um... I dunno. You wanna do anything?"

"I wanna go hiking."

Dream gives him a blank look. "Hiking?"

"Yes."

"You realize it's, like, ninety degrees out."

"No, but I know it's thirty-two degrees *celsius* out."

"You're really annoying today," Dream comments and George smiles, taking another bite of a fry.

"I don't really care."

"You really wanna go hiking?"

"Yep!"

Dream sighs and pulls out his phone, but when he digs in his pocket, he feels his fingers brush against the camera. He glances at George who was zoned out on the cracked pavement and he pulls it out.

George looked cute with half a fry hanging out of his mouth, a blissful peacefulness in his body and the sun makes George's eyes brighter. Dream snaps a picture and his friend didn't even react. Instead, George holds out his hand with his eyes still glazed over, and Dream presses the camera into his palm.

"What are you gonna do? Take it again?" Dream asks.

"No, we're gonna get a picture together," George answers. He holds the camera out in front of them, turning it so their reflections shine in the lens. George leans in close to him and Dream feels his stomach fill with butterflies as he leans closer too. Their cheeks brush and Dream grins against the sun, hoping the light drowned out the explosion of color on his face. There's a snap and George hands Dream the camera back. "There. Now we're even."

"That's gonna come out so bad," Dream says.

"It'll be funny, though," George points out and Dream gazes down at the little camera in his lap.

Dream couldn't wait to see it, though.

2 p.m

“It’s hot.”

Dream wipes at the sweat gathering at his hairline and his hand was sticky from carrying their empty smoothie cup. He felt disgusting. “Who’s idea was it to hike three hours before our photoshoot?”

“Yours.”

“No, it was yours,” Dream says. A rock wiggles its way into his sandal and it stabs his already raw heel. Hiking in sandals was horrible. Hiking, *itself*, was horrible. He smelled like sweat, cheap soap, rotting smoothie, and now sand and dirt was sticking to his skin.

This sucked.

George folds his arms and then groans, letting them fall to his side again in frustration. “It’s *hot*, Dream.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Dream snaps and he hands George the smoothie cup. “Hold this.”

“Ew, no! Why do I have to hold it?”

“Because you’re making me hold it and I’m the one who’s supposed to be guiding us through this stupid hike.”

George makes a face, but he takes the cup with pinched fingers, refusing to let his entire hand touch it. “This was the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“It wasn’t-! Okay, George, no talking until we get to the cove. Got it?”

“Why can’t I-”

“You’re complaining too much,” Dream says, stepping over a tree root.

“I’m not-”

Dream stops and he presses a finger to George’s mouth- too hot and too frustrated with the stupid trail to care when George glanced down to Dream’s lips again.

“Shh,” Dream whispers. George glares at him but his lips stay sealed and Dream slowly pulls back his finger.

There’s a few minutes of silence as they walk. Their footsteps mixed with nature’s sounds, and the faint sound of waves kept them on track in the direction they were supposed to be heading in. Every few minutes, a cool breeze would sweep in and lift the scent of earth and sunscreen to Dream and it was comforting to smell Summer.

“Your finger smells like banana,” George mumbles and Dream groans loud enough to silence the birds for a few seconds.

“Come on, that was barely five minutes!”



“You can’t just silence me-”

“Yes, I can!”

“I had a question! Are you going to ignore my question?” George cries and Dream stares at him.

*Yeah.* “Fine, George, what was your question?” George smiles. “If it’s about me carrying the smoothie cup, the answer is no.” George’s smile falls.

“No...I was going to ask where we were?”

“I dunno.”

“You don’t know?” George repeats.

“I mean- we’re definitely somewhere in Key Largo.”

“That joke isn’t funny! Where are we, seriously?”

Dream laughs and he makes a point to step over a rock, taking his time answering. “Relax, just trust me.”

“I already trusted you by following you here,” George points out, speeding up a bit to keep up with Dream’s long strides. Their shoulders brush and Dream’s hand wants to reach out to George’s again like it did the night before.

*George’s hands were warm- hot, almost, like the inside of his body was burning bright. The heat felt nice against Dream’s cool hand, soothing the ocean water pooling in his chest. George held on to him with surprising strength. George’s slender fingers lined up perfectly with his knuckles like a missing puzzle piece that was finally in the right spot and it brought a still calm to Dream. George felt perfect. Warm and solid and certain- something Dream needed. Something Dream wanted.*

*That’s why when they got back to the resort, when George’s hand gave a final secret squeeze before slipping like sand from Dream’s fingers, Dream felt the ocean water in him turn murky and cold again.*

Dream’s fingers twitch.

He starts to reach out. He needed to feel that certainty again. He needed to know if what he felt was real and not some wishful memory.

George’s fingers flinch against Dream’s graze, but he doesn’t move away, so Dream spares a glance and runs the tip of his pinky down the side of George’s.

George balls his hand in a fist and despite the humidity around them, George folds his arms and tucks his hands into his elbows.

Dream’s hand relaxes at his side again and he has no choice but to live in the cold uncertainty for a bit longer.

*I know what I’m feeling, but I don’t know how I feel about it. I want you, George, but would you even consider me? Give me a second look? Would you risk everything? Dream pretends to look up at the trees, but his eyes shift to the side to watch George’s jaw grind in thought. I would. It’s wrong and I know I shouldn’t because it’s you, George. I want you, so when can I have you? Fuck- if I can even have you.*

Dream sighs and he sees a small opening and twinkling clear water. *Baby steps, Clay, baby steps.*

“We’re here,” Dream announces, spinning on his heel to face an unimpressed George.

“What is it?”

“A lagoon.”

George blinks at him and stares at the water and tree roots crawling into the white sand underneath it. “We walked all that way for a lagoon?”

“It was barely half a mile and yeah,” Dream answers, peering back at the sight. It was pretty and the clear water faded into a deep blue as the open ocean kissed the Key Largo coast. The lagoon floor was bare except for a few minnows swimming in the shallows.

“Cool. Can we go back to town now?”

“Oh, come on, we didn’t come this way just to turn around! You wanted to hike.”

“Yeah, but like, in town.”

“You should’ve said you wanted to walk there!”

George deadpans. “I was curious to see where you were going to take me.”

“And you complained the whole way.”

George smiles to himself like he was proud he managed to get underneath Dream’s skin. Dream ignores the cocky grin, swallowing his petty comments because they still had hours together and someone needed to be the bigger person here, and Dream would happily be the mature one.

“You wanna go in?” Dream asks.

“Are we allowed to?” George says, tilting his head slightly.

“It’s the ocean, George. Why wouldn’t we be allowed to go in the ocean?”

“I dunno! Isn’t it against the trail’s rule or something?”

Dream shrugs. “I didn’t see anything.”

George shifts on his feet and then shakes his head. “No, I don’t wanna get in trouble.”

“Hey, George?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re in the middle of a nature trail and we haven’t seen anyone else and I doubt five minutes in the water is gonna get us in trouble. It’s not like it’s a reef or wild animal. It’s sand.”

George is quiet for a second before a fond smile appears on his lips. “You love arguing, don’t you?”

“Well...I mean, I’m right.”

“I’m still not getting in, though,” George laughs and he folds his arms.

“Y-ew love nought having fun, don’t y-ew?” Dream quips in a terrible accent.

“That was rude.”

“C’mooon, Georgie-” Dream holds his hand out, palm aching to feel George’s hands against it. “You said it yourself- it’s hot and the water is a great way to cool off.”

George hesitates for a second, brown eyes flicking around Dream’s face with a million thoughts behind them, and George slowly places his fingers against Dream’s hand. Just as Dream goes to hold them, George yanks his hand back.

“Wait,” George says, “I have an idea.”

### 2:36 p.m

Dream can feel George’s racing heart against his spine and it sends a wave of heat through his body, and he forces himself to focus on wading in the surprisingly cool water. Without dropping George.

“This is nice,” George hums, arms draped heavily over Dream’s shoulders.

“For you.”

It was nice for Dream to feel George’s burn again, but he didn’t admit it. Mainly because he couldn’t and it only felt nice for the first few minutes before George’s weight made his back and arms hurt and his body heat made sweat pour down into Dream’s eyes.

George was hooked on Dream’s back with dangling toes barely brushing the surface of the water. This was George’s brilliant solution to his fear of getting in trouble- if they were to get caught (even though Dream insisted that they wouldn’t), George could have the excuse that he wasn’t technically *in* the water. Dream was. And Dream didn’t know why he even agreed to it in the first place, maybe it was the heat getting to his head or maybe it was because he really didn’t care and just wanted George with him.

He chose to sway towards the heat madness reason.

“Move your elbows, George, you’re stabbing me,” Dream chokes out. His collarbones had to be bruised by this point.

George shifts and Dream has to lock up his body to keep from falling backwards. They didn’t need to show up to Isla sweaty, sticky, and soaked. “Sorry,” he mutters. He didn’t sound sorry.

“Are you done being scared? Can you get off now?” Dream asks and George laughs into the back of Dream’s head.

“You’re just mad that I’m being smart about this.”

Dream shifts his weight to keep from sinking into the sand. “What are you getting out of stabbing my shoulders with your boney elbows?”

“A cool down.”

“But cooling down was the whole point of coming in the water and you’re not even touching it.”

“I don’t have to stand or walk, so, yeah, I *am* cooling down, Dream.”

Dream groans and starts to carry George back to where the trail was. The lagoon was small and Dream crossed it quickly, lifting his knees high to stomp over the water. Their shoes were lined up neatly on the small ledge that hung over the water and Dream kept his eyes focused on his dirty sandals to ignore the numbing pain growing in his arms and shoulders.

“Hey, do you have the camera?” George asks abruptly.

“In my pocket, yeah.”

“Can I see it?”

Dream knows better than to look over his shoulder since George’s face was already too close to his neck, so he hopes George could see his eye roll. “Yeah, if I had an extra arm.”

“What?”

“My hands are full, idiot, what do you mean ‘what?’”

“Well, either you get it or I do.”

Dream sighs. “Why do you need it right now?” He asks, but he leans over to one side slightly so his hand lines up with his pocket. It was hard to grab at the camera and keep George’s leg hooked around his elbow, but he somehow managed to grab it, and George snatches it out of his hands.

“To take a picture, obviously.”

“Okay, yeah, but of wh-”

George’s pale arms appear in front of Dream’s eyes and the camera of the lens is pointed directly at his face. Before Dream could even react or duck his head away from it, George’s face presses against his. It wasn’t like the first picture they took together- that time their cheeks brushed and there was a comfortable sliver of space between them. This time, however, George’s entire face was smushed against Dream’s, making their cheeks squish up their eyes, and Dream can feel George’s grin. If he could feel George’s smile, George could definitely feel the furious wave of heat slap his face and the sweat dripping down his temple.

It was going to be one ugly picture.

There’s a click and a flash, dots dancing in Dream’s vision, and then the blue waves return.

George is saying something but Dream couldn’t hear him. He was too busy taking faster steps to their shoes on the dirt ledge- practically dumping George to the ground when they get there. When George slides off, Dream’s arms feel a million times lighter and the painful ache disappears, the blood rushing back into his numb fingers. He braces himself over his knees. Dream needed a second to relax his trembling muscles and racing heart.

*It’s amazing how one person can cause so much adrenaline,* Dream thought as he stared at the water. He’s never been so scared to be with George before.

“Dream, are you seriously that tired?” George laughs.

“I just carried a grown-ass man across a lagoon,” Dream says.

“No one said you had to.”

*“You literally said that!”*

George smiles because he knows Dream is right. Because as much as George wanted to argue and joke around, he knew Dream was right about everything. Or that's what Dream liked to believe.

*“You ready?”* George asks.

Dream climbs back up on the trail and shoves his feet into his sandals, cringing when sand and dirt and small woodchips get in them, but he nods and starts to lead them out of the nature trail. His legs hurt, and for a while, George walked a few steps in front of him, occasionally turning around to make sure Dream didn't collapse or fall too far behind. It wasn't until they saw the exit sign for the trail when George slowed down. They walked in a quiet silence with shoes hitting dirt and then pavement, elbows and hands brushing in shy longing, but neither of them wanted to make the move. Dream was still wiping sweat from his face, hands busy, and George was George, knowing exactly how to stand close enough to make Dream's stomach flutter but stay far enough away to avoid inviting anything.

It was painful for Dream, but he pushed on because what else was he supposed to do?

**4:18 p.m**

There was a cat.

They've been standing in the hot sun for almost twenty minutes because George insisted he saw a cat walk into a small alleyway between two buildings.

Dream was going to kill George.

*“George,”* he huffs out, *“if there was a cat, don't you think we would've heard something by now?”*

*“It's here.”*

*“You said that, like, ten minutes ago.”*

*“It's here, Dream,”* George repeats, squatting in front of the alleyway and rubbing his fingers together. Dream leans against the wall of the building.

*“I'm gonna leave you here.”*

George barely looks at him. *“Mhm.”*

*“I am.”*

*“I don't care.”*

*“Fine. Have fun with your imaginary cat,”* Dream says. He starts to walk away, making it to the end of the block, and then he turns back around, expecting George to be a few feet behind him and dragging his feet. Instead, he was still crouched in the same spot with his fingers wiggling. Dream folds his arms and stares at him for a second. Surely, George would notice Dream left and come looking for him right?

After standing there for a minute, Dream realized that George wasn't budging.

They were supposed to be on their way to the Key Largo town's flea market. They already spent some time bouncing from building and building, taking pictures of each other until the camera threatened them with an angry looking 1 in the photo counter. But now they were stuck on this street because George thought he saw a cat.

When Dream walks back, he kicks George lightly with his dirty sandal. "C'mon. Get up."

"I wanna see the cat."

"There is no cat."

"I can literally see it right there, Dream," George says, pointing to a metal trash can. Dream peers over George's finger and sees nothing.

Dream shakes his head. "I think the heat is getting to you," he pokes the back of George's head. "Let's go to the market. It's around the corner."

George doesn't say anything, but he does stand up, and Dream starts walking back to the end of the street.

"Look, when we get done at the market, we can come back here and see if the cat is...George?" Dream looks around him. George wasn't walking next to him anymore. Dream looked back to the alleyway and George was gone. *Great.*

"George?" Dream calls. The ocean breeze answers him. "Geooooorge?" Giving an annoyed sigh, he walks back to where they were, making sure to make as much noise as he could with his sandals.

He stares at George who was creeping towards the garbage can, whispering to the invisible cat, and Dream coughs.

"Shh!" George snaps, waving a hand at Dream.

"George. There isn't a cat-"

There's a small meow that makes Dream's words stop dead in his mouth.

"Hi!" George coos and he bends down. A small gray cat nudges George's outstretched hand and meows again, yellow eyes staring up at him. Dream watches from afar- surprised that George managed to lure out the tiny animal with his finger rubbing. George turns to Dream, running a hand down the cat's back. "What was that about a cat?"

"...Nothing," Dream sighs. George starts to scoop it up. "Okay, George, don't pick it up. You don't know if it has some disease or-"

George brings it over to Dream and the cat looks comfortable in George's slightly burnt arms. "Look," he says in a gentle voice to the cat, "It's Dreamie! Say hi."

Dream and the cat lock eyes. The cat gives a small mewl and Dream's heart melts a little bit. He lifts out a hooked finger and the cat rubs its head against it, already purring slightly.

"How'd you do that?" Dream asks George. They watch it butt its head against Dream's hand.

"I'm a cat whisperer," George jokes. Dream chuckles. "I told you there was a cat."

"There's also a flea market we're supposed to go to."

“Okay, okay,” George says, bending down so the cat can leap out of his arms. He gives the cat one final rub before following Dream out of the alleyway. “You said it was around the corner, right?”

“Yup.”

They walk together to the market, finally, and Dream’s skin jumps when George’s pinky hooks with his. Dream knew better than to push him or give the dramatic reaction his brain *wanted* to give, so instead, Dream swings their hands slightly and George smiles to himself. A smile he does when he’s lost in himself, but with an emotion that he feels in and out- a smile Dream has rarely seen except for times like this. Times when they would crack inside jokes on call or times when George would come to America and smile to himself when his friends were all around him. A rare but nevertheless beautiful George smile.

Then George’s pinky slips away from Dream and he’s back to study the world around him- eyes neutral, mouth barely turned up in a smile, and hands busying themselves with the things on the stands.

It was a moment so quick that Dream wasn’t sure if it happened. He couldn’t remember if it was him that reached out or if it was definitely George, but he swallowed the sadness pooling in his heart. *I can’t have George*, he reminded himself.

He wants to ask if George meant to do that. If he meant to reach out to Dream and share his bright burn, but Dream pushes on deeper into the market because what else was he supposed to do?

#### 4:30 p.m

It was the familiar glint of metal that got his attention. Dream was like a fish and he took a sharp turn to where the metal sparkled in the sun against green felt. The stand keeper was an old man with tan, wrinkled skin like leather and his hands were worn from years of bracelet making. When he saw Dream stride to his little stand, he smiled, but didn’t say anything.

“What?” George asks, coming up behind Dream. “What’d you see?”

“I dunno- just bracelets, I guess,” Dream responds, carefully picking one up. One metal bracelet had dark blue beads with a single white one and he turns it in his fingers. The metal burned his fingertips from staying out in the sun. Next to him, George picks up a green bracelet with a single black bead on it.

“These are cool,” George says.

“They’re heavy.”

“Yeah, but like, they’re good bracelets,” George admits.

“Why? You know something about bracelets, George?”

“No, but I can tell.”

The stand keeper held out both of his palms and it took a few confused looks to piece together that he wanted them to give the bracelets back. Dream and George press the metal jewelry onto his palms and he holds them up to the sun.

“Everything is balanced,” he says in a deep voice. He slowly brings the bracelets together and

Dream watches as the white and black beads are pulled towards each other, finally hitting with a small snap. "Everything belongs together."

Keeping the bracelets together, he hands them back to Dream and George, and Dream can see that the bracelets form two perfect circles.

George is the first one to move. He carefully pulls the green bracelet away and slides it on his wrist and Dream follows him. Lifting their wrists, George and Dream move them together until their bracelets snap together and George snorts.

"They're magnets," he says obviously.

"Thanks, George," Dream quips dryly. "Do you want them?"

George pauses for a second, considering the jewelry. Dream's arm was starting to hurt from holding it up. "Are you gonna get yours?"

Dream looks down at the dark blue one hanging loosely on his wrist. It reminded him of the night sky.

It reminded him of George.

"Yeah," Dream decides, "I am."

George nods once. "Then so am I."

The man's smile grows as Dream digs for his money and pays him and the two walk off. They tried to walk side by side, but the market was crowded and every time their hands passed each other, their bracelets would get stuck together. George ends up falling a bit behind Dream, letting him lead them back to their rental car so they could go to the dreaded photo shoot.

"Why is everyone in Key Largo so weird?" George questions. "I mean, that guy was talking in, like, riddles. Like he was in some book or movie or something."

"Book?" Dream repeats, looking back to arch an eyebrow at his friend. "Come on, now."

"I'm serious! There's that mean, jumpy woman, Isla, then that lady at the aquarium-"

"She was nice."

"She was nosey!" George insisted.

Dream snorts. "That's like three people in Key Largo. Are you generalizing, George?"

"No! I'm just saying, everyone we've met has been so weird."

"Maybe they know something we don't," Dream says.

"Like what?"

Dream thought for a few seconds as they walked, but nothing really came to mind. "I dunno."

"Exactly!"

"That doesn't make *everyone* in Key Largo weird- maybe it makes you too normal."



“That’s deep, Dream,” George deadpans.

“I try.”

George rolls his eyes and then his face lights up. “Hey, we still have one more picture left on the camera, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“With you, I have to,” Dream says. As the words fall out of his mouth, he knows that they were more than a petty comeback in their conversation. He knew that he was admitting to George that he still had no idea what to make of him.

But Dream hands the camera and George charges it up and he holds out his hand. “Give me your hand.”

“Wh-”

“If you ask why, I swear to God, Dream, I’ll break the camera.”

Dream holds up his hands in mock defense and holds out his hand, biting back an excited jump as George takes his hands, and his heart stutters when their bracelets click again. George’s hand was still hot and smooth and pale against Dream’s tanned skin. George looks through the viewfinder of the plastic camera and points down to their hands, snapping a picture of their bracelets.

“Now we’ll have something to show Isla when she asks if we got any cute pictures,” George says. Dream smiles, but it doesn’t meet his eyes. *Duh. Of course.*

Not like they already had some from before. From the smoothie place and the lagoon. Not like they took goofy pictures of one another messing around in shops. Not like they spent the whole day together on a date.

*Date.* Dream’s skin crawled. *Wrong word. Not a date. Just a day out. I mean, I guess to Isla and literally everyone else it’s a date, but seriously, I don’t need to be thinking that.*

When they got to the rental car, George almost immediately started complaining about how hot it was and rolled down all of the windows as Dream drove. The town melts away into sand dunes and the ocean blue as they drive to Isla, wind whipping through Dream’s hair, and the wind tasted like pineapple, sunscreen, and salt. Dream and George’s elbows rested on the middle console, pressing against each other, and neither moved. The green camera was tucked safely in George’s hand like he was scared to let go.

Dream’s heart swells with the music on the radio when George laughs at something he says against the wind. In the heat of the moment and how *perfect* everything seemed to feel, Dream grabs George’s free hand on the console. His heart pounds and beats and jumps and spins and does *everything* when George locks their fingers together. Their bracelets snap together and George laughs harder.

Dream grins and takes his hand off of the wheel to turn up the music to drown out how loud his body was buzzing.

He held George’s hands for five whole minutes before George finally pulled away. Five minutes of tropical paradise as he drove. Five minutes of George- completely and utterly unguarded.

When they see Isla standing on a sand dune with cameras, Dream allows George to pull away from him. Dream lets George build up the walls again because at least he knew that they could be broken through.

When George acts like nothing happened and moves on much faster than Dream, Dream doesn't push George. He allows himself to wonder, but Dream doesn't let it show on his face.

Isla rushes to them, already firing out directions for what they need to do, and Dream fights against the longing pull to George. He knew better.

So when George doesn't meet his eyes anymore, Dream rolls back his shoulders and grabs his photoshoot clothes from Isla's arms because what else was he supposed to do?

### 5:10 p.m

The breeze flutters against Dream's loose t-shirt and he shudders.

"Dream!" Isla calls. "Dream, move closer to George!"

Dream gives George a look. His friend was already leaning against his chest. "...Okay?"

Dream shuffles an inch closer and George slams his head back against Dream's shoulder in frustration. "I hate this," George says.

"I know, but it's only for a bit. Then we can go back to the resort and grab something to eat."

"And watch a movie?"

"We can watch a movie."

"What movie?" George wonders.

"There's that one with the guy and the-"

Isla whistles. "Guys! I need y'all to stop talkin' for a second!"

An awkward silence settles and there's a loud, foreign click. Something scary and uncomfortable compared to Dream's little green camera he bought.

"Okay..." Isla says over the wind, peering down to the photographer's camera. "Okay, we got it! Perfect guys!"

George quickly pulls away from Dream. "Great! Are we done?"

"Next pose we're gonna try is somethin' completely natural, alright? A candid, if you will," Isla states and George's shoulders sag. Dream leans down to his ear.

"That would be a no, Georgie."

"Shut up, Dream."

Dream chuckles and backs up, waiting as Isla explains the vision in her head. Her hands were wild in the air with dramatic gestures and air hugs, and that should've been the first sign that Dream should speak up about touching. But he lets her ramble off in her photo fantasy with photographers

nodding eagerly and adding on to it. George didn't seem freaked about anything, so Dream assumed that everything was fine with him. Dream shoves his hands in his stiff cargo shorts, fingers cold.

"What if we have them in the water?" A photographer asks Isla.

"Oh my gosh! Yes!" Isla cries out in excitement, a beam on her tired face. "You got that boys?"

"Yeah," Dream shrugs. He had no idea what their plan was, but George seemed to understand Isla's rambling because his friend grabs his forearm and tugs him back to where the waves meet the sand. "What are we doing?" Dream whispers to him.

"Candids."

"You're not very helpful," Dream says.

George shrugs. "So I've been told."

Dream's second sign should've been how Isla's face seemed to scrunch up as she watched the boys stand in the water. Neither of them were doing anything and the large gap of space between their chests seemed to make her eyes flick from Dream's face to George's, so Dream gives her a smile. She smiles back and waves her hand to make them get closer, but Dream can tell she wasn't exactly thrilled with them at the moment.

Dream takes a shuffling step towards George. His friend seemed to lean back a bit to keep the space. There's a snap of a camera and then Isla's pained groan.

"Y'all, just pretend we aren't even here, okay? Do somethin' other than look at each other- we already have a lot of those shots," she pleads.

"What do you want us to do?" George calls to her. She doesn't hear him over the ocean and continues to watch them with her scrunched face. George shakes his head slightly. "They want us to act natural with four cameras pointed at us."

"Okay..." Dream says carefully, "I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"What if we-"

"Come on, boys! I know you got some love in y'all!" Isla shouts. Dream cringes slightly.

"Love?" George repeats.

"Why do you sound surprised? We're supposed to be in love." The word has the same burn as George.

"Yeah, but like...why'd she have to say it?"

"I don't know, George! Can you pay attention for a second so I can tell you-"

"Doesn't she know it's really weird when she brings it up?"

"George, listen-"

"I wonder if she does it to other people too."

“George!” Dream yells and he kicks water at George in frustration. “Listen!”

“Why’d you splash me?!”

“You’re not listening!”

George’s jaw sets as he looks down to his wet shorts and white t-shirt and then in a sweeping motion, George bends over and flicks water up to Dream’s face and shirt. Ocean water slaps his face and runs down his skin. His t-shirt clings to his chest and for a second, he considered letting it go because he kind of deserved it. But then, when his eyes blink against the dripping water, he sees George staring at him with a smugness that made Dream’s blood boil. George was standing like he defeated Dream in some sort of battle and Dream wasn’t going to let that go straight to his friend’s already big head.

So in a fit of competitiveness, Dream kicks a big wave that completely soaks the bottom of George’s shirt. George flicks more water up and Dream’s patience is gone.

“George?” Dream says in a low voice. There’s another splash and his clothes were getting wetter and wetter.

“Yeah?”

“You can swim, right?”

“Duh,” George says. He’s confused and the petty splashes pause. “Why?”

They stare at each other for a moment and George takes the risk of sending a tinier and more hesitant splash up to Dream.

As soon as the cool water sinks into his skin, Dream’s hands shove George into the water and his friend gasps, grabbing onto Dream’s shirt for balance, and ultimately yanking Dream down with him as he falls. The two splash into the shallow water as baby waves hit their bodies. Dream’s t-shirt and shorts clung to his frame like a second skin and he tries to catch himself from falling directly onto his friend. With locked arms bracing himself above the water, his fingers sink into the soft sand like claws as he stares down at George with wide eyes. George was laying down in the water, brown hair floating around him like the world’s ugliest mermaid, and his eyes were equally as wide. Dream can see George’s chest heave in a panic and Dream tries not to pay attention to George’s palms pressing against his chest.

Holy fuck- Dream couldn’t help it. His eyes roam down George’s face and settle on his lips for a brief moment.

“Dre-” A wave comes and covers George’s words and face. George shoots up and their foreheads slam together. The dull ache makes Dream roll off of George and sit in the water, not caring if his clothes were going to get sandy. They were already ruined.

George coughs and sputters, desperately wiping water from his eyes as he sits up next to Dream. His brown hair was plastered straight on his face like someone dumped melted chocolate on his head.

“You’re an idiot!” George snaps.

Dream hides his face in his hands. “I didn’t know you were going to fall!”

“Of course I’m going to fall- you pushed me!”

“Oh my goodness!” Isla says and she scrambles to them. “Oh my gosh, oh no! Are you alright George?”

“My eyes hurt,” he responds, still rubbing them. Dream rolls his eyes. *He’s so dramatic.*

“Yeah, that saltwater hurts...but we got some excellent shots!” She says and she tugs at Dream’s wet sleeve. “I guess your clothes are a bit ruined, huh?”

Dream and George exchange a look. “Um, yeah?” Dream says.

She pauses to think, red lips puckered. “Okay...okay, no problem! It’s fine, we’re almost done anyways. We just need to get one more shot!”

“Okay, what do you want us to do?” Dream asks, starting to stand, but Isla laughs nervously and pushes him back to the sand.

“Now...this is kind of...I don’t wanna say ‘mandatory,’ but it’s required that we try to get an intimate moment captured for the ad. We had to do it with all the other couple’s on contract and it’s just to have options and...” She smooths her dress, “you know...capture all the romance here since we are a couple’s resort and all.”

“Did you get Dream laying on top of me?” George asks in a bored voice. Dream’s neck almost breaks from how fast he turned his attention to George. George doesn’t look at him- which is good since Dream probably looked like a beached fish at the moment.

*Don’t act surprised, Clay.* Dream snaps his mouth shut. *He was there- of course he’s gonna notice that you fell on him.*

“Um...yes, we did,” Isla coughs awkwardly.

“Just use those then,” George responds.

“See we would, except that was more playful than romantic. Fun is all over your faces and we need something more than that.”

George doesn’t say anything but he stares up at her with a hard expression and Dream bites the inside of his cheek. “What are you thinking then?” He prompts.

“A kiss.”

Dream blinks. “A what?”

“A kiss,” George answers for her. A wave crashes on Dream’s stiff back.

“We just need *one* shot, y’all. Just one to show the manager and if you want, we won’t use it at all in the paper ads,” Isla explains. Dream was biting his cheek so hard he almost drew blood. George’s mouth was shut tight. Nobody knew what to say.

Saying no meant raising suspicion and Isla already had reasons to be cautious- shit, she picked up on their discomfort with each other yesterday on the boat. Saying no was not an option they could take. Even George knew that because he didn’t rush to decline the idea. On the other hand, saying yes meant that they had to break one of the top three rules. Saying yes meant risking George’s trust.

“Okay,” Dream breathes out lightly. George’s eyes lower, but he gives a small nod.

Isla smiles and she gives a quiet thank you and to Dream's surprise- she apologizes to them.

"I'm sorry, y'all, I know it's weird."

Dream swallows, but it did nothing to help his dry throat. "We're supposed to be in love, right? It's okay."

Isla's eyebrows twitch, then she leaves.

Following the turn of Isla's hands, they turn their backs to the camera so they could have some sort of privacy (even though Dream can feel the camera lens stare into the back of his head), and they gaze out at the horizon. They were losing daylight little by little. They didn't stand up from their spots in the water and Dream leans back on his hands. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. They were both trying to decide how this was going to work.

"Sorry for head-butting you," George mumbles.

Dream nudges him lightly. "It's fine. I deserved it for hurting your wrist."

A wave makes seafoam stick to Dream's torso and he pretends he doesn't notice how George rubs his wrist gently. A gull cries from somewhere above them and there's the sound of a camera.

"We still on for movies after?" Dream jokes light-heartedly. That makes George crack a smile.

"Maybe."

More silence.

George sighs. "We should get this over with...right?"

"Yeah, yeah...Yeah, for sure."

"Okay..."

Even more silence. Dream moves his hand beneath the water, watching the sand make it murky.

"Dream, just do it," George says sharply and Dream looks at him. The normally hard brown eyes were soft and George looked scared. "Get it over with," he whispers.

Dream didn't know why he had to make the move, but he presses his lips together and turns his body more toward George. George was already turned to him because, like their bracelets, they were magnets. That same pull Dream felt in the hot tub came again and Dream scoots closer.

"Stop stirring the sand, Dream!" Isla yells. Dream looks to the sky and George gives a pitiful laugh.

"I don't like her," George says.

"Look at that," Dream smiles at George, "We finally agree on something."

"Amazing."

"A miracle."

Dream pulled closer and everything in his body screamed for him to stop because this was wrong. This isn't what they agreed on. This isn't at all what he expected to happen, but Dream's heart

coaxed him closer to George- the little devil whispering in his ear on his shoulder. Dream's kissed a million times before, but this time, his hands shook with nerves as his wet hand touched George's cold cheek. George closes his eyes at the contact and Dream's brain flashes a million colors behind his eyes.

*No more what if's, Dream told himself. Just a second or two.*

Dream's right there. He can feel George's pulse race under his fingertips and something in his body stirs. *Do I really have that effect on you?*

"Just do it," George pleads in a hoarse voice. His friend's eyes were still screwed shut, so Dream studies the constellations on George's cheekbones.

"Okay," Dream whispers back. He leans forward and his head gets light when George's soft lips brush against his lips. "I'm sorry about this," he whispers into George's mouth.

Then Dream closes the space.

George tastes like saltwater. George's once cool skin turns blazing hot under his touch. Under his lips.

Dream's eyes slide closed and blue burns him to his core, sending electricity from his lips to his stomach and to every limb in his body. Dream wants more.

His instinct screams to pull George to him, but just as Dream pulls his other hand out of the water, the noise pulls George back to reality. As soon as it started, the kiss ended. George pulls away with hazy eyes and wet lips. Dream wants to pull him back in and feel George all over again, but he digs his hands into the sand and looks at a seashell a few feet away from them. George pulls further away and Dream wants to scream.

His knees felt like jelly as they walked up to the shore to Isla. They're handed their dry and sweaty clothes from before and neither of them talk.

"Okay! I'm gonna run back to the truck to check in with the head photographer," Isla says with a clap, blissfully unaware of the damage she just caused them. It wasn't her fault, though. This was Dream's idea from the beginning.

When she leaves, George watches her and then he looks around him. "Where are your keys?" He asks. Dream is surprised that George even said something to him and his response is slow.

"Um..." Dream fumbles in his dry short pockets and pulls out the rental keys. "Here."

"I'll be right back, I left something in the car."

"Okay," Dream says weakly. He watches until George disappears over the sand dune, leaving Dream alone and cold.

### **5:50 p.m**

George didn't come back for a while, but when he did, he was changed and he looked lighter. The dull, dark expression on his face was lifted with light eyes and a small smile. Dream didn't know what he did, but if George was okay after all of that, he didn't want to ask questions.

But Dream would admit he was jealous that George seemed to move on from the kiss a lot faster, leaving Dream still reeling from the addicting rush as they drove back to the resort. They followed the photography truck all the way back with the music and wind filling their mutual silence. George would occasionally read out a tweet on Twitter and Dream would chuckle, but neither of them pushed the conversation further.

When they got back to the resort, they dragged their feet to their room and Dream offered to put on a movie, but George shook his head and said he needed to grab something from the gift shop downstairs. Dream let him go and spent his time alone in a freezing shower, bracing himself against the wall with a finger pressed to his lips, holding on to the feeling of George for as long as he could before he shuddered and turned the water off.

George, again, doesn't come back for a while. When Dream does hear the soft footsteps outside their door, he catches the sound of high heels walking away from the door too. But he doesn't ask. Dream was getting good at not asking- mainly because he knew he wouldn't like the answer if he did.

George comes back with a bag of Goldfish and a large Kitkat bar. He never met Dream's eyes, but then again, Dream didn't bother meeting his. Despite George's weird distance, he tosses Dream the TV remote and breaks the KitKat in half, handing it to Dream, and he settles on the bed when the screen lights up their room. They watched the movie with the Goldfish and candy between them and the stiff awkwardness between them started to melt a bit as George slipped back into himself, cracking jokes and commentary to lure Dream out of his mind.

Dream hated that it worked.

He hated how George knew how to get him to stop thinking. Dream hated how the pull was stronger than before. He hated that George had this sickeningly sweet effect on him- one that made him laugh and smile.

An effect that made the ocean in Dream turn clear and warm.

### 11:48 p.m

Movies pass as the sun lowers in the sky, the moonlight lighting their room through the thin curtains. Dream was fast asleep at this point and he was pretty sure George fell asleep long before him. But, he wakes up when he feels the bed shift a bit and the blanket is yanked off of him.

"George?" Dream says, barely moving his mouth.

"Sorry. I'm cold."

Then Dream feels a pillow be plucked off the bed. "George." The other side of the bed eases and Dream rolls over to look at his friend in the dark. "George, what're doin'?"

"I'm going back on the floor."

"Why?"

"...There's crumbs and stuff on the bed."

"You're so picky," Dream snorts.



“Sorry for wanting to be comfortable.”

“Whatever.”

There’s a muffled thud of a pillow and then bones cracking as George loudly lays down on the carpet at the foot of the bed. Dream starts to drift off again, but George starts to talk.

“Dream?”

“Hm?”

“Do you miss her?”

Dream’s eyes open slowly and he stares at the inky ocean through the balcony doors. He doesn’t know why he takes time to think about it because he knows the answer. “No. No, I don’t.”

“Did you love her?”

“For a while, yeah,” Dream admits. “Why?”

George moves on the floor. “What’d it feel like?”

“What did what feel like?”

“Love.”

Dream sits up in bed and stares down at George. George looks up at him and it doesn’t take long for Dream to slide out of bed and sit next to George on the floor, his back pressed against the wooden footboard. Dream doesn’t really know how to explain it at first, cycling through billions of words but nothing seemed to fit the definition. Nothing captured the same feeling he felt all that time ago until he glances at George and goes breathless from how his friend glowed in the moonlight- almost like he was born from a star.

*The dreams.*

Dream shuts his eyes.

“It feels like rain,” he whispers to George in the dark. “Like freezing rain in a desert.”

George lets out a shaky sigh. The two look at each other in the dark and George’s fingers trace the curve of his arm, making Dream want to reach out and press George’s palm to his cheek. But Dream waits for George to say something. To laugh and call him stupid and tell him he was crazy for saying that, but George presses his lips together.

“Okay,” George mumbles. “Goodnight, Dream.”

Dream smiles even though George can’t see it. ““Night, Georgie.”

George huffs out a laugh as Dream crawls back up on the bed, but he brings a pillow to the other end so his head is lined up with George’s on the floor. Dream lets his arm dangle over the floorboard as he buries his face into the pillow and he falls asleep just as George’s hand wraps around his finger.

George is out cold, but when Dream wakes up at sunrise, he lifts George’s hand to his lips and he presses a kiss onto his fingers.

Why?

Because what else was he supposed to do?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**June 18**

**9 a.m**

Dream had a lot of trust in George- that's something clear and straightforward he needed to get out of the way. Everyone knew that George was like Pandora's box when it came to secrets, however, under the right amount of peer pressure and curiosity, George could be opened to release all the monsters and demons he kept safe. Dream knew George was like that, but George would never unseal his lips to hurt him, right?

...Right?

George would never hurt him.

At least not intentionally.

"Dream?" Isla asks, placing a hand on his knee. "Are you okay?"

No, he wants to say but his mouth feels like it was stuffed with cotton balls.

*"George told me you broke your promise."*

Dream's head feels lighter than before.

*"He came to me yesterday and told me about your plan, Dream. He told me everything."*

Everything? Dream feels bile creep up his throat and he tries to swallow.

*"I understand you broke some rules. Your own rules and Moonlight's rules."*

Dream used to argue that rules were made to be broken, but now, he wanted them and he wished he could take it all back.

"Hey," Isla whispers, careful not to talk loud enough for the other agents to hear. His eyes are drying up in his skull even though painful tears are building up behind them. "Are you alright?"

"What did...what did he say?" A part of him hoped he could fudge George's words. Make it seem like she misunderstood.

The look in her eye makes him feel like he shouldn't have asked. "For what part?"

"All of it," he manages to say.

"Well, he first came up to me yesterday after the photoshoot. He could barely get words out and when he did, it was pretty straight forward," she explains, "he said, 'Isla, we aren't in love.'"

A bone-chilling stab hurts his chest and he loses his breath.

"At first I didn't believe him because I've seen y'all together for the whole week- goin' on little

dates and stuff- and I just saw you guys kiss. I thought he was joking, Dream, and he had every opportunity to take it back and I wouldn't have known that he told the truth. Now, I didn't know why he decided to come clean then, but I told him that he and I needed to talk when we got back to the resort. So he came down and sat in that very chair you're in and he told me about your stunt. He told me the rules and how you managed to break a lot of them and he told me how the promise was broken. Now, I never got him to tell me what the promise was, but I can tell you know exactly what he means."

Dream's breathing gets shallower and anxiety wraps an iron fist around his heart, squeezing until it felt like it was going pop in his ribcage. George knew. *Was it that obvious?*

Isla continues, "I should add that before he came to see me, when we were drivin' back here from the photoshoot, I was lookin' at the photos we took. All of them. From the mini-golf to that very beach, and let me tell you, Dream- you had everyone fooled. You painted a truth of an awkward couple that only understood each other and I spent so much time staring at these pictures and thinking: 'How the heck is this fake?'" She laughs and picks at a piece of lint on her skirt.

"What'd he say, Isla?" Dream asks. She doesn't say anything for a while, both listening to the quiet tick of the clock from somewhere in the office. The office behind the customer service counter. The office that killed the spark Dream once had. Isla still doesn't make an effort to say anything. Dream can tell she didn't want to.

But then she sighs and uncrosses her legs. "He told me how it was getting too much for him."

Dream shuts his eyes and the pain in his chest expands until his entire body hurts. A dull ache that throbbed under his skin.

"When I asked him why he would tell me now, with two days left here, he couldn't answer me, Dream. And then, he simply told me he was scared. Now, whether that meant he was scared of getting caught or scared of you, is something I can't quite figure out. That boy is hard to read and I don't know how you managed to break him down enough to come into my office with tears in his eyes. But, honey," she leans forward when a tear slides down Dream's cheek, boiling his skin, and he feels a gentle hand on his knee. "Honey, I don't think he was scared. I don't think that was his real answer- I believe it was a, now excuse my language, *bullshit* answer to get me off his back."

"I..." Dream can't say anything. For the first time that week, Dream's brain was silent.

"Now, Dream, I need you to be honest with me, okay?"

Dream doesn't open his eyes but he gives a short nod.

"Dream, sweetie," she says in a soothing voice, "do you love him?"

Dream swallows the knot in his throat and he opens his eyes to look at her. She looked sympathetic as she waited, rubbing a slow thumb on his knee to ease him out of his anxiety, and his entire body shook. Everything was a rose color around him and his body was too hot- George's burn finally sizzled its way to his heart and it *hurt*.

But then there was the gentle cool of the ocean in his chest. The gentle water that muffled his feelings for so long felt so sweet and comfortable and Dream wanted nothing more than to sink back into it. He wanted to shake his head and push everything to its depths again.

George's burn was evaporating the water, though, and it brought light to Dream's depths.

"Yes." His voice shakes as he says the single word. Dream's head filled with air and he saw

turquoise dots dance in his eyes.

So he closes them again and stares at the star behind his eyelids. "I love him."

He doesn't need to see her to know that Isla is smiling- the excited squeeze on his knee gave it all away.

"Okay...okay, Dream," she breathes out lightly. The tears are acid in his eyes and it reminds him of the first time he felt the rain. "You're okay, honey, I won't judge you."

"That's...th-that's not what I'm worried about," Dream says.

"Get it all out here, alright? I won't tell anyone and we can talk about what's gonna happen after." He hears her sit back in her chair, the leather squeaking under her weight.

"There's no- there's nothing to say."

"There is so much to say, Dream. Just...tell me about him."

Dream tries to take a gulp of air to fight back against the built-up sob coming from his throat and he clenches the chair's armrests to keep his hands from shaking even more. But Isla doesn't say anything. She doesn't change her expression, she doesn't push for him to talk- she lets him sit and fight against the terrifying panic drowning him because she knew this is Dream's fight. At this point, there was nothing she could do or say to take back Dream's words, thoughts, and actions towards George. So she sits and waits, rubbing soothing circles onto his knee.

"He likes Kitkats," Dream finally breaks, "and he always says he likes my sweatshirt even though he can't see the color and it probably looks horrible to him. He sucks at mini-golf and he's left-handed and he hates sharing smoothies and he loves cats and music and he likes the stars and he-" Dream pauses to take a quick breath, a tear sliding out from the corner of his eye. "He knows what makes me laugh and he knows how to get me to stop thinking and he's always been there. He's always been reliable and even though we argue about stupid stuff a lot, he always comes around. He knows what I'm thinking and he knows *me*. He has glow stars on his ceiling and tries to organize his clothes by color but he always ends up calling me to help. He makes fun of me and calls me an idiot. He likes the color blue because it's literally the only color he can see and he has freckles and gets sunburnt easily-"

Dream doesn't know how long he rambles for because the words and facts just keep coming from his mouth, and Isla listens the entire time. She laughs and nods at the right parts and encourages him when he struggles to say words through his tight throat. She listens and pays attention and she sees Dream's now discovered feelings. She can see right down into his ocean because of George's lingering light in his soul.

"Dream, honey," she sighs and she watches another silent tear hang onto his cheek. "I think you need to tell him."

"I can't."

"Is it because of the promise?"

Dream nods. "I can't do that to him. He never wanted to do this."

"I don't think he wanted to *fake* it," she slips and she presses her lips together quickly. "Look, sweetie, you have to tell him. You have no idea how much better you'll feel after and if he truly does understand you, like you said, then he'll know exactly what to do. I can't tell you if he'll

accept it or if he'll push it away because I am not him, but-"

"And what? Risk our years of friendship?" Dream cuts her off.

Isla thinks for a second. "*El amor no respeta la ley, ni obedece a rey*. Do you know what that means, Dream?"

Dream gives her a look. He didn't pay enough attention in his high school Spanish class to catch even one word of that phrase.

"It basically says that love has no bounds. It's not confined by any ruler, law, or lock," she waves her hand and sighs. "My mother used to tell me that love is a criminal since it didn't follow any rules."

Dream didn't know how to respond to that. "It's...pretty."

She nods. "Right? And George tells me that you broke quite a few rules- including the promise."

Dream looks away as he remembers slowly pushing George, day by day, until rules crumbled into dust in their hands. They finally picked away at 'No kissing,' and that was stepping into dangerous territory.

"So, Dream, I think your friendship was already put at risk as soon as you step foot onto Moonlight's property. Don't tell him because you want to love him, tell him because you want to accept it. Tell him for yourself."

"And if he gets angry?"

"That's George and you can't control him," she shrugs, "but I've seen how you two interact, both online and in-person, and I know you will always find each other again. He'll come back around."

Dream remembers the tidal pool and he realizes bittersweetly that she's right.

He feels sick as he asks, "And if he takes it?"

"Then you love him," Isla leans forward and grabs his hands, her eyes soft with excitement and happiness. "You love him when it hurts and bleeds and heals and you love him until neither of you can breathe. You love him until your heart feels like it's goin' to explode straight outta your chest and you love him as much as the ocean loves the moon."

Dream wants to laugh at her comparison, but he's too freaked to even crack a smile.

"You hold onto him so tight and you never let him go, Dream. You give him the universe and I hope that boy is smart enough to return the favor to you."

"He is the universe," Dream says. He closes his eyes and smiles to himself as he remembers his thumb brushing against George's freckles yesterday- their lips hot enough to form a new sun between them.

"Then tell *him* that."

*Easier said than done.* "I can't." George proved to be something dangerously complex during their time here and Dream felt like he needed to learn George all over again. Isla's hands slip from his as she thinks.

"Okay, honey, I didn't want to do this, but..." She swings around and grabs a thick purple binder

from her desk behind her, flipping through until she lands on a pile of papers stapled together. “We’re running out of time, here. *You’re* running out of time.” She glances up at the clock.

“Right...right, yeah.”

“Now, as much as I adore you and George- even as friends- we need to sort out the legal issues you’ve caused *and* you need to work things out in here,” she pokes a finger at his chest, “which is why I’m proposin’ this...”

She hands Dream a copy of their contract he signed just a month ago. He stares down at his messy signature, tracing his name with his fingertip. *If only I knew the shit this was gonna cause.*

“You broke your contract, Dream. Plain and simple. That was a legal document we both signed that stated you and George were supposed to be together and if somethin’ were to jeopardize the resort’s image, like breaking up and being an unhappy couple, stealin’ property, talkin’ bad about others and Moonlight- the contract would be terminated. That includes a fake relationship, Dream, although it doesn’t explicitly state that. Now, I fought a long and hard battle to have you boys here. I went up to the top dogs to have bigshot Youtubers stay and I fought even harder to have two men in our ads. If this contract were to be terminated, there’s a good possibility I will be fired for wasting the resort’s money because they *will* believe that I knew about your little plan. They don’t think I’m serious enough to run an ad project and they will certainly think I lied about you just to get what I want. That bein’ said, I do not want to end our contract.”

Dream lets out a sigh of relief. “Okay, that’s fine-”

“I’m not done,” she said, cutting him off with a finger pointed at him. “Legally, under the Moonlight Resort’s protocol, I have 24 hours to do the right thing and end the contract after receiving news of a soiled couple.”

Dream had a feeling this was going into territory that he wouldn’t like, but he stayed quiet since it felt like he was being scolded by a school principal. This was the most serious he’s seen Isla and the power in her voice when she talked about the threat of the contract made him bite his tongue.

“But I’m willing to make you a deal, Dream,” she says.

“What deal?”

“You love George. So, you will tell him by midnight tonight how you feel, regardless of the consequence, and I won’t end the contract. I will turn a blind eye to everything George told me and we will continue on, business as usual, for the last two days of your stay. I will play along and cut back on the photos, but you have to tell George you love him. Not because I want drama and I want to see you hurt, but because I know from experience how much better you’ll feel knowin’ you *tried* and you were true to what you were feelin’.”

Dream shifts in his chair, considering her words, but his stubbornness still bit his stomach. “And if I don’t?”

“I will be forced to end our contract and kick your asses to the curb by eight in the morning tomorrow. Not to mention the compensation that you will have to pay for abusing Moonlight’s resources and the fact I could be fired.”

Dream leans back and the two stare each other down. Isla was smarter than Dream thought she was- the way she stared back at him, almost down because she knew she had power over him in this situation, made Dream feel small despite him having a good foot on her.

*I could lie*, Dream thought, staring at the large conch shell on her desk. *I could come back and tell her I told George and everything was fine...* Yet, despite his effort to find a loophole, something in Dream stirred and he didn't want to lie. Dream knew Isla was right and he almost did want to tell George.

Dream's feelings bubble up to the surface and he can see them clearly as he realized what he needed to do.

"Okay. Fine."

"Deal?" She asks, holding out a hand.

Dream hesitates for a moment, but he takes it. "Deal."

"You have sixteen hours. Tick tock, Dream."

**11. am**

**Fourteen hours remaining...**

*Breathe in....and breathe out...*

Summer fills Dream's head as he walks, feet crunching on gravel and dirt, and he tries to breathe with the wind- inhaling when it blows through the trees and exhaling when it stills. He almost suffocated a few times since the beach breeze is always unpredictable (Dream had those long gusts to thank), but at least it kept his head from spiraling down into a panic again.

It was cool outside. It felt more like Spring than Summer to Dream and there was the threat of a storm on the horizon, dark clouds slowly scaping across the sky towards them. The ocean was dark. The resort was quiet. The wind made Dream's skin chilled and he wraps his arms around himself.

*In...and out...*

"What are you doing?" George asks next to him, leaning forward slightly to get Dream to look at him.

"It's cold."

"Not *that* cold... Aren't you hot in your sweatshirt?"

"I'm fine." Because despite his hoodie protecting his body from the wind, it bit at his face and that was enough to make him feel freezing. It was cold enough to shove his hands in his pockets to keep whatever warmth he had.

God- he can *feel* George's eyes crawl over him like little spiders, but Dream still refused to meet his eyes now. Dream was angry that George went to Isla, out of all people, to talk about their plan, instead of going to Dream to work things out with him. After all, Dream was the other half in this- it made no sense to him why George even felt the need to take a step that big and rat them out instead of putting Dream in his place. George did it before and he could've done it again.

Dream sighs, kicking a rock. *Whatever. It's too late to ask now.*



Yet, even though Dream was mad, he didn't tell George about his meeting with Isla. In fact, Dream didn't mention her name at all. He figured that if he did burst into their hotel room and start yelling, George would go into George-mode and fall back asleep to refuse answering anything until he got something out of Dream. So instead, Dream set an alarm on his phone for midnight and kept his mouth shut when he walked back in, tapping the back of George's head with a bottle of apple juice while his friend stirred awake.

"Where'd you go?" George murmured, rubbing his eye as he sat up.

"I got us breakfast," Dream said. He only got them breakfast because he needed to buy himself time to calm down. "You like bagels, right?"

George nodded and took a sip of juice. "It took you forever. Where'd you even go?"

"The dining hall."

"Yeah, but like, you left an hour ago."

Dream fell silent for a moment as he tore off a piece of bagel, hoping George didn't see the pause in his movement. "There were a bunch of fliers and stuff- I was looking at them."

"Anything good?" George asked. Dream felt bad for having George carry the conversation, but his mouth was too dry and his body was too cold to even form straight thoughts.

"Ummm," Dream searched his brain for something he vaguely remembered during his walk, "there's a race happening later? We could do that."

"Does Isla have anything?"

The mention of her name made Dream choke on his bagel- a dry piece of death clinging to his throat like his words did.

"Not that I know of, no." *She doesn't have anything because you told her, idiot. She can't give us the passes knowing we're breaking contract.*

"Oh," George had said, "well, there's a garden we can go to?"

"Sure. I don't care." It felt weird to use George's line, but Dream truly didn't care what they did- all he knew was that he needed to watch the timer ticking down on his phone.

And that's where they were now.

Walking side by side, both keeping distance with their own secrets, they were silent in the Kew Garden (Dream thought the name was ridiculous, but he couldn't help but smile a little bit whenever George said it).

"*Key-u* Garden was founded by the owner Joshua *Key-u*," George reads off of a plaque in a bush, swiping at the overgrown branches covering the writing. "It's dedicated to his daughter."

"Hm. And what's his daughter's name, George?"

George pauses to read. "Sandra."

"Sandra..."

"*Key-u*."

“George, it’s *Kew*. K- ew,” Dream pronounces slowly, fighting back a small laugh. He was supposed to be mad but it’s hard when George is an idiot.

“That’s what I’m saying!”

“No, it’s not! You’re saying *key-u*. It’s k- ew.”

“Yeah- *key-u*, that’s what I’m saying!”

Dream rolls his eyes. “*Kew*.”

“*Key-u*,” George argues, “it’s my accent, idiot.”

“Or it’s you pronouncing it wrong.”

“It’s literally my accent-”

“Excuses.”

“It’s not an excu-Dream! That’s messed up, you know I can’t help it.”

Dream starts walking again, moving on from Joshua *Key-u*’s plaque. “Just talk normal, George.”

“I am talking normal!”

“Then say it with me,” Dream turns on his heel, “K- ew. ”

George sets his jaw, annoyance working its way into his features. “K...” his eyes scrunch as he focuses, “ew. *Keeuu*,” George finishes in possibly the most offensive American accent Dream has ever heard. It was so bad, Dream had to take a minute to process the word his friend said before his eyebrows shot up.

“That was horrible.”

“I told you! It’s my accent!”

“The word is shorter, George, it’s not your accent!” Dream cries and he holds his hands up to get George to focus. “K- ew. Quick and short.”

“Fine. *Keu*. ”

“Not the letter ‘Q.’ The *Kew* Garden, okay?”

George looks ready to hit him. “*Keeu. Keuu. Keuw? Kew. Keow-*”

“Wait- go back.”

“*Keow?*”

“Before that.”

“*Kew?*”

Dream claps in his face. “There you go! Now say ‘*Kew Garden*.’”

“... *Kew*, ” George stresses, making a face at the pronunciation, “Garden.”

“Exactly,” Dream says. When he turns around again, George kicks the back of his knee and Dream stumbles a bit. For a few minutes, his anger slipped from his mind and he walked on- tropical blue and orange flowers brushing against his legs.

The garden was fairly big and pretty easy to get lost in. Like the mini-golf place, it was its own little jungle with wild plants and vines crawling up the short stone wall around the garden, overgrown and reckless with thorns threatening to cut a finger open if someone grabbed onto it. Big palms and trees shaded them from the dull sun, which made Dream colder, but it was still gorgeous. Everything around him was emerald with sprinkles of vibrant colors from flowers as the gravel path led them to the center where a Greek-like statue peeked over a large leaf.

“You know,” George says, batting at a low hanging leaf, “I don’t think they really take care of this place.”

Dream side eyes him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s all dull and stuff. They have weeds everywhere,” George responds and he points to a tiny red flower as they pass. Dream’s eyebrows furrow for a second.

“Weeds? What are you-” Dream stops walking when he realizes. “George, that was red.”

“Oh.”

“Wait,” Dream turns in his spot, looking at the greenery around them. Everything looked healthy and the plants were thriving in the tropical weather. Dream touches the red flower and turns to George. “Is everything yellow to you?”

“Well...yeah, kinda, I guess,” George says.

Dream points to a deep blue flower. “But that’s blue, right?”

“Duh.”

Dream felt the lick of anger again at George’s bluntness, but where the blue flowers were, there was a small stone path that took a detour from the main one. Dream can see the blue flowers on either side of it and it was the perfect, and correct, color for George to see. Dream felt a pull to it and he started to follow the new path. George watches.

“Where are you going?” George asks.

“There’s a path.”

Seeing it, George’s curiosity gets the better of him too because George follows, eyes widening at the sea of deep blue around them as they walk. The flowers smelled sweet and some had small flecks of white at their center like little Milkyways. Dream smiles to himself and leads them further down the path, his phone timer burning a hole in his pocket and his gears fogging up his brain.

*Here*, Dream decided once they reached a small opening- still surrounded with George’s color- with a tree and a rickety bench under it. It was freezing and Dream was warm walking, but he sits on the bench, leaning back to look up at the sky through the branches. *I’ll do it here.*

It was the perfect place. No one was around. It was quiet. No distractions and when things did get ugly, Dream had the comfort in knowing he can call dibs on running back to their room to hide for a bit. It was perfect, it was romantic, it was a scene out of a book for the perfect love confession, yet, Dream’s anxiety still squeezed his body.

Dream takes a slow breath in. George was sitting next to him, gazing out at the flowers, brown eyes flicking around and thinking. Neither of them spoke and the silence was crushing Dream as he built up the nerve to just *say* it. To say it and be done and figure things out with time to spare.

The world spins around him as his mouth opens. “George-”

“What color are those, Dream?”

Dream blinks and sees George pointing to a small cluster of orange hibiscus circling the blue flowers. “Um,” Dream says, “orange?”

“All of them?”

He looks again. “There’s a few red ones-”

“I wanna see them,” George decides and he stands up, brushing his shorts off from the dirty bench, and he starts to walk over to the flowers. Flowers George couldn’t even see.

George is walking too fast for Dream to stop him and by the time Dream got up, George was already at those stupid hibiscus flowers, touching each one with slender fingers.

“There’s only red and orange ones,” Dream says when George bends down to look at one, brown eyes narrowed. “Hey, I’m kinda tired from walking, can we go sit down again?”

However, just as Dream turns to walk back, another couple walks into the area and sits on their bench. Dream lets out a defeated sigh. Dream’s perfect spot was taken *and* now people were here. He had no choice but to look back down to his friend and squat next to him, giving into this little game.

“What other flowers are here?” George wonders, looking around him. The sun hits George’s face perfectly through the branches and it lights up his dark eyes, making his faint freckles appear darker like someone blew cinnamon onto his face. It hurts to look at George, but Dream was used to it at this point.

It was hard to believe that this George, the guy asking what colors flowers were, was the same guy who sank their ship and had Dream’s heart in his hands.

“There’s some more blue ones,” Dream says. “Few pink...few purple...white...” George nods and looks around them, walking from bush to bush in curiosity. “You didn’t bring your color glasses?”

George scoffs. “Why would I? I didn’t know I would be walking in a colorful garden when I came to America.”

Guilt settles deeper into Dream’s body as he watches from a few feet away, George taking steps away from him to go look at flowers. The longing to reach out to George and pull him back closer made Dream cross his arms tight over his chest. A breeze echoes in their silence before Dream starts to talk.

“Those are purple,” he says when George touches a flower with round petals. “Purple like how grape juice tastes. Purple like...like royalty, you know?”

George looks back at him. “What? What are you saying?”

“I’m describing the colors since you can’t see them. It’s more than just piss yellow, right?” Dream says and George cracks a grin at the immature joke, turning back around before finding a pink

flower.

“That’s pink. Pink like how cotton candy tastes and how grandma perfume smells.”

George throws his head back in a quick laugh before touching an orange flower with spiky petals.

“Orange like how orange juice smells.”

“I don’t like orange juice.”

“You won’t like the color then.”

George’s smile grows a bit more and it was becoming really hard to be angry. George’s pale hands find more flowers and Dream keeps listing how each color smells and looks like, using different nouns to describe the same color because it made George laugh. Dream would do anything to hear George laugh.

“What’s this one? This is a rose, right?”

“Yeah,” Dream responds. “They’re red like anger, you know? Heat. Red like how spice smells.”

“Roses are red,” George laughs.

Dream shrugs easily. “Violets are blue.”

“You’re an idiot, aren’t you?” George finishes and Dream shoves him away from the rose bush, keeping his friend walking before Dream confesses at the wrong time. Admitting your love right after being called an idiot seemed like a bad move and Dream wanted, no, *needed* it to be perfect.

“That’s all you, George,” Dream claps back as they walk back into the main part of the garden.

The fountain was right there and it wasn’t as grand as Dream hoped it would be. It was a basic-looking marble fountain that looked like he could buy it at Home Depot, but there was an explosion of light blue and deep blue flowers all around it. Some flowers fluttered to the gravel after people picked the plants and dropped the flower heads back down and some stems looked wilted from where people sat. It was still pretty nevertheless, just a bit defeated.

George goes to look into the fountain, saying something about stealing the coins out of it, but Dream could barely hear him as he openly eyes George, his face softening a bit from the wide grin he had. The words are there in his chest, but he couldn’t say them. Instead, he walks next to George and continues to look at his friend’s sharp features in the wavering reflection of the water, wishful images of them consuming all of his thoughts. Dream feels something brush his knee and he looks down to a bright blue flower poking his skin. The edges of the petals were stained a deep blue and Dream tries to be extra careful when he plucks it. He didn’t want to rip the perfect petals.

“This is blue,” Dream says, holding the flower to George. His friend had no issue seeing the color, but Dream wasn’t worried about being accurate right now. His heart is racing from the gesture and if he can’t say the words yet, he’ll tell George some other way. “Blue like the cold. Blue like...” Dream thought for a second, “Blue like how water feels.”

George looks at him before nodding slightly, waiting for Dream to do or say something else. He doesn’t take the flower, so Dream makes the next step.

“Blue like you,” he mutters and he takes the green stem of the flower, sliding it slowly behind George’s ear. The bright blue blazes against George’s brown hair and pale skin. Dream swallows

and lets his fingers linger behind George's ear for a second longer, before pulling back.

Neither of them say anything, but it wasn't awkward. Dream lets George study him with rapid eyes, and for once, it was nice not to be the one confused and wondering.

Dream stands strong, trying to control the rush coursing through his bloodstream that made him so bold. The feeling is sweet and it makes his stomach turn like he ate too much candy, yet, he couldn't get enough of it. His heart raced at lightning speed in his chest and it was like he was climbing to the top of a roller coaster- his arms raised and putting too much trust in the unknown cart carrying him to George. Just as the cart tips at the very peak, the words *right there* on his tongue, Dream raises his arms on the ride and his mouth begins to open.

Then, George rolls his eyes and touches the flower behind his ear gently, pulling it out of his hair and he lets it flutter to the gravel. It's then that Dream is reminded that he *can't* say it now. Not yet.

Literally swallowing the words, Dream scoffs and plays it off with his own eye roll at George, kicking at the rocks beneath his beat-up sandals. He couldn't say it, but he could think it. So Dream meets George's eyes and he smiles, completely swallowed with how much he adores George with his stupid freckles and messy accent.

*I love you, George.*

"You really *are* the idiot here, Dream," George says after a moment, gesturing to the flower on the ground between them.

"I'm surprised that didn't get you to blush or something," Dream comments. George continues to stare up at him and Dream desperately wants to touch him.

"I told you," George whispers, "I'm hard to break."

## 12 p.m

### Thirteen hours remaining...

It was amazing how *good* George could poker face. Seriously- if Dream didn't know better, he would've never, ever, *ever* guessed that George snitched. George was completely unbothered with Dream's quietness as they ate. Shit, George was unbothered by everything around them.

The sand burns the bottom of Dream's feet as he draws his knees to his chest. It was still chilly outside and the black clouds over the horizon gave no sign of disappearing anytime soon. Dream watches the clouds crawl over to them and then he falls onto his back in the sand, throwing an arm over his eyes.

A grape hits his temple. "You're gonna get sandy," George points out.

"It's sand. I think I'll live, George."

"Why are you even laying down in the first place? Are you tired?"

Dream peeks at George from under his arm. *Tired of going in circles, yeah.* "Something like that."

"Oh..." George says and then he places his fruit cup down next to him, careful not to spill it onto

the sand, and then he slowly eases back until he's laying down next to Dream in the sand. George twists his neck to look at Dream. "This isn't very comfortable."

It was a funny joke, sure, but Dream can only manage a small smile. "Never said it was."

"Dream, can I ask you something?"

That question never brought anything good to the table, but Dream's biting curiosity was on overdrive today, so he nodded, looking over to George. They both had their faces pressed into the hot sand and Dream definitely had sand sticking on his cheeks. It was killing him to look at George, though- an angel on the beach without even trying as his face turns to the sun, making the air rush out of Dream's lungs.

"Where were you really?" George asks, looking at the empty blue sky. "I mean, like, did you really go get breakfast this morning?"

"Yes," Dream lies, "I told you, I got distracted on the way and there was a killer line and-"

"Okay, okay! I was just asking, don't get too defensive."

Dream lets out a breath, blowing sand up. "Sorry."

"Thanks for the juice, by the way."

"No problem."

"It was...good..." They lay in the sand for a minute longer, then George asks, "Are you being honest?"

"What?"

"You're telling the truth, right?"

"Are you?" Dream prompts and he sits up, looking down at his friend. George, curse his natural ability to mask, doesn't look fazed by the question. Dream doesn't even get an eyebrow twitch as a hint that George is lying to his face.

"Why would I lie?" George says.

"I dunno, George, why would you lie? Do you even have any secrets?"

George looks into the air like the answer was going to appear in front of him. "To answer both questions- I'm not lying and of course I do."

"You do?"

"Don't get off track, Dream, you still have to answer your question," George says and he sits up too, sand falling from his clothes. Dream makes a face and George sighs. "Are you telling the truth too?"

"I tell you everything. I don't have a reason to lie to you." Dream points out. That gets George's expression to break for a second, his eyes scrunching quickly before his easy expression returns. Dream feels terrible for lying straight to George's face and building a web around him, but he refused to give George what he wanted. George was looking for him to break down and admit because, as Isla said, George was well aware of things. But Dream was stronger than him. Dream won't say anything until the perfect moment comes again and he'll make George wonder.

“True,” George finally says.

“Exactly. Now shut up and eat your fruit cup.”

George drops the questions as they brush the sand off of their clothes, but Dream’s mind created enough noise to replace their absence. His curiosity sinks its teeth deeper into his stomach and he can’t help nudge his friend.

“Hey,” Dream starts, “What was that secret you were talking about?”

George shrugs. “That would defeat the purpose of it being a secret.”

“Oh, come on, I tell you mine.”

“I already told you it,” George says a bit harshly. George turns to Dream with the clearest frustrated expression Dream has ever been able to read on him. Ever. “Did you already forget about it?”

Dream wracks his brain for a memory of George telling him something. The longer Dream takes to respond, the more the frustration grows on George’s face until it breaks into something slightly pained, and then George sighs.

“Forget about it, Dream.”

“No! No, I remember it, I just can’t say it out loud-”

“It’s fine, really. I said it kinda confusingly, I guess,” George says in a small voice. Dream’s heart breaks a bit and he goes to reach out to George, but he stops himself and pulls his hands back to his short pockets.

“We’re on different pages,” Dream laughs dryly.

George shakes his head and more sand falls. “You think?”

“A bit.”

“A lot.”

“Alright, okay,” Dream responds, but a smile appears. “I have an idea that might put us on the same page again.”

**1:15 p.m**

**Twelve hours remaining...**

*“George! George, stop!”*

Dream reaches for him, but his fingers just barely graze his friend’s shoulder, and Dream stumbles. He doesn’t give up the chase though as he desperately calls out George’s name.

“George! Slow the hell down- George!”

“Shut up, Dream!”



“Stop running-”

“Don’t talk!”

“I’m trying-”

“Shh!”

Dream groans and grabs onto George’s arm, trying to steady himself as his left foot gets yanked forward by George’s right. The duct tape around their ankles was slippery with sweat and sand, but it held them together tightly and it did a great job with making Dream trip straight into his friend. They hadn’t been running for long, but Dream was already tired and his leg was hurting from George’s pulling. His free leg was desperately hobbling to keep up with George’s speed.

“We need to get in sync again, idiot, stop!” Dream yells. He digs his heels into the sand, making them burn from the friction as George tries to pull, but he stays firm. “Stop!” He commands.

George is panting, but he stops and watches the other couples hobble around them. “What! What do you want!”

“On three, we’re running with our taped foot first and then-”

“It won’t work, we run at different speeds!”

“George, trust me-”

“Just come *on!*” George cries out and he grabs Dream’s arm, pulling him back into the painful run to the water. It was low tide and the beach became twice the size it was at high tide, meaning they still had a long way to go from the dunes to the water. A rash was forming on his ankle, but he fights through it and tries to keep up.

*Left then right, left then right-* Dream watches George’s running pattern and makes an attempt to follow it, stepping with his left foot when George steps with his right. It was still awkward, but at least Dream wasn’t constantly tripping.

“We’re almost there!” George says to Dream, pointing to the green water. It was dark from the incoming storm, but it was still shimmery in Dream’s eyes.

They make sure they wade into the shallows where a resort employee stood with small buckets huddled in her arms. They make it to her and Dream tries to apologize as George splashes water onto her shirt, but his friend drowns him out.

“Get a bucket! Get the blue bucket!”

Dream looks at the green one on her other arm. “Why can’t we get the green one?”

“I don’t care! Just get a bucket!” More couples come up behind them and start plucking the remaining buckets from the employee’s grasp. Dream stands there for another second, trying to decide. “Dream! Oh my God!”

“Do you want the blue one?” Dream asks. Don’t get him wrong- he wanted to win more than anything and it was making him crazy to fall behind, but it was funny to drive George equally insane. Dream considered this payback for the week of living hell.

“It! Doesn’t! Matter!” *Matt-ah.* Dream snorts. “Stop laughing! Just pick one!”

The only reason why George couldn't get the bucket was because he taped their ankles. At the beginning of the race, the organizer made the rules clear: the person who tapes their ankles cannot be the one to grab the bucket at the next leg. George, stupidly, took on the taping job since he could rip the tape quickly and thought Dream's competitiveness would be full-force today. He never guessed that Dream would mess around and it was great.

"Remember! There aren't enough buckets for every couple-" The employee shouts to the last few trickling in from the dunes. "If you don't get one," a pointed look to the boys, "you're out."

*"Dream!"*

Dream laughs and finally swipes the blue one out of her arms. As soon as the bucket is safe in his grip, George yanks him away and up to the beach, cursing at him and throwing low-blow insults, but Dream was too busy laughing to care.

"You're stupid! What the hell would you take that long to decide on a goddamn bucket!" George screeches.

"We got it and that's all that matters-"

"We were in the lead! We're dead last now!"

Dream looks around them to the couple's slowly building their sandcastles and the couple's that were out. No one was in that big of a rush except for George, who was shoving dry sand into the bucket.

"Wait!" Dream says, grabbing George's wrist. "We can't use dry sand."

"Why not? Everyone else is."

"Okay, I know I was messing around before, but if we want to win, we have to use the damp sand," Dream explains. George's eyes squint, but he lets Dream lead him to where high tide once was. The sand was starting to dry and they needed to be fast.

They slowly sink to the ground, side by side since their tape was still holding them together, and Dream scoops up the sand. "Damp sand will hold the castle together. Dry sand will just crumble and wet sand will make it droopy."

"Right. Right, yeah, that makes sense."

"My sister and I made these all the time and we buried my dad in the sand once." Dream didn't know why he said that, but it got him a smile.

"You buried him?" George was now dumping sand into the bucket. They needed at least three mounds of sand for it to count as a castle and they were already done with the first bucket.

"Yeah, but like, we left his head out. We didn't bury him alive," Dream adds. "Now we pat it so it packs together and makes the shape better." George watches Dream pound his hand into the sand and flatten it before following his lead. Their hands bump against each other and Dream mutters an apology, but George doesn't seem to mind as he keeps putting his hand underneath Dream's. Dream punches George's hand again. "I'm not apologizing for that, that was your fault."

George smirks. "Whoops."

"If you get hurt, it's on you."

“I’m not gonna get hurt- ow!” George hisses and he yanks his hand away. “You punched me!”

“Your hand was in the way.”

“And you *still* punched it?!”

Dream shrugs. “Whoops.”

George throws sand at Dream’s shirt, but they dump their first mound onto the beach. There’s broken seashells and stuff sticking out of it, but it was a solid start. They high-five and start filling up their second bucket.

A few other couples caught on to their tactic and moved to the damp sand, but at this point, they were already done. They had a big enough lead to add tiny windows in their castle with their thumbs and reach for washed-up seaweed to make flags. Once another couple finishes up their castle, they scurry up the beach and their movements are already better than before. Dream kept up with George and they reached the final employee down the beach.

The employee hands them a card from his basket and George snatches it.

“What does it say?” Dream asks, peering over his shoulder.

“It says... *‘In a place where the sky meets the sea, where ocean life pools, you’ll discover the Moonlight’s jewel.’*” George pauses and reads it again. “What does that mean?”

They fall silent as they think and they can see other pairs run to them, arms clinging to each other for balance. Dream’s panic sets in as they draw closer and he flexes his hands.

“Um, okay, okay- let’s break it down,” Dream says, taking the card.

Dream’s head dips down to his as they read it again. “Well, we know where the sky meets the sea- that’s definitely the horizon, right?”

“So it’s somewhere on the beach...But where does ocean life pool? That could be the entire ocean,” George mutters. Dream presses his lips and looks down to his friend. The two exchange a look and Dream’s eyes fall onto George’s face.

*Constellation freckles.*

*Born from a star.*

*“Did you know that the stars we’re seeing now are actually years old?”*

*The tidal pool.*

It’s the tidal pool.

“George!” Dream shouts suddenly and George jumps. “George! It’s the- where ocean life *pools*, ” he stresses and George’s eyes widen.

“No way! You don’t think-”

“Come on!” Dream grabs him and they start running down the beach towards the rocks. As they run, their strides become one as they hold onto each other for steadiness. Their footprints line up perfectly with one another and the waves wash them away, but a faint outline stays. Their mark on the earth doesn’t dare to leave.

Dream's out of breath when they come to the tidal pool. It was filled with life and water and there, settled on the rock in the dead center, the rock George stood on that night, is that goddamn golden seashell. The one they couldn't find before, but now it stuck out like a sore thumb in their eyes.

"You think that's it?" George whispers.

"It has to be."

They jump in and get their shorts soaked. They step over crabs and snails as they make their way to the rock and in one motion, like they were one giant person, they grab the shell together and lift it in the air.

The golden seashell flashes Dream in the eyes. "Holy shit, George!"

"We did it!"

A swell of excitement makes a laugh bubble up Dream's throat and he throws an arm around George's shoulders, holding the shell higher above his head for all of the losers behind them to see. He lets out a loud whoop as giddiness settles over his skin and rubs off on George.

"I told you we would win-" Dream's words are cut off when George throws his arms around Dream's torso in a fit of happiness and Dream stands there for a moment, staring down at George clinging to him. George's beaming grin rivals the sun itself and Dream lowers his arms from the sky to hug him back. George is small against him, but his burn is enough to make Dream weak.

When George pulls away, they were still alone in the pool, save for the approaching couples, and Dream was drunk from the sudden hug and the feeling of winning that he dips down to look at George dead in the eyes.

His smile is so big, his cheeks hurt. *Now. Do it now. He's happy.*

"George! George, I-"

"Congrats, boys!" An employee says, climbing over the rocks. "Sorry for being late, I had to grab the scissors. You want me to cut you free?"

George heads to her, taking Dream with him, and they're cut free. George snatches the shell and separates himself, climbing over the rocks and turning to wait for Dream to follow. The wind blows George's gleeful laughter as he looks down at Dream- making a joke about finally being taller- but Dream can't help but admire with a soft smile.

Dream climbs up on the large rock bordering the pool, taking place next to George. "Listen to me, George, I lo-"

"Aw, man! We were late?" A couple asks, emerging from behind them. Dream's grin fades into nothing.

"We won!" George tells them. He holds the seashell gently in his palm and jumps down from the rocks, making his way back to the resort to collect whatever reward they got. Dream sighs and watches George's footprints walk away from him.

"I love you," he whispers into the wind. The unforgiving beach breeze takes his words and carries them up to the sky and away from George.

3:32 p.m

Ten hours remaining...

The timer was counting down angrily on his phone as he watched it, each second dissolving into nothing as he and George sat in silence on the back deck of the resort. Each second that went by was lost time and he tried not to panic. Ten hours was a lot of time- sure, he technically had less time since they would be sleeping for the last few hours before twelve, but it was still *hours* .

Needless to say, Dream felt the pressure, but his stubbornness kept putting it off until that ‘perfect moment.’

The storm clouds were coming closer. Dream stared them down as George rocked them gently on the bench swing, zoned out on the sky, too.

“That’s one hell of a storm,” Dream mutters, breaking their silence.

“You think it's a hurricane or something?”

“No...no, if it was a hurricane they would’ve had everyone inside and stuff. We would know.”

“Tsunami?”

“Have you heard about any earthquakes?”

George considered it and then shook his head. “No, but you never know.”

“We’re okay, George, it’s just a storm,” Dream laughs and he goes quiet again, worn from the race and too far in his head to carry a conversation.

“Dream?”

“Yeah?”

George hesitates and then sighs. “Nevermind. I was just gonna ask something stupid.”

“Like?”

“I’m not telling you! You’re gonna make fun of me.”

“George, anything is better than this silence,” Dream jabs and he gestures around them. They were pretty much alone and it was quiet except for ocean noises and the steel drums from hidden speakers.

“I was just gonna ask about...you know...” he says, voice trailing off.

“I don’t. Ask about what?”

“Just like, ugh, I don’t want to say it-”

“You can’t start to ask and then back out of it! That’s not fair.”

“To who?!”

“To me! What were you going to say?” Dream says, poking George in the ribs. George shies away with a suppressed grin.

“I was just going to ask about pillow forts.”

Dream gapes at him. “*Pillow forts?* What? What about them?”

“Well, like, my mum and I used to make them during storms when I was younger,” George says, folding his legs up on the bench. “So I was just thinking about it and I was wondering if you ever did something like that?”

“I mean, I’ve built a few, but when I was really young and had friends over. Nothing, like, big, you know?”

George nods. “Yeah. They’re fun.”

“Why? Did you want to build one?”

“No,” George scoffs, but he picks at the cushion under him. “Of course not, don’t be an idiot.”

“Oh my God- you totally do!”

“Okay, and?! We can’t even do it anyways.”

“Why not?”

“I dunno...our room is too small, I guess.”

Dream gives an easy shrug. “Does it have to be big? I mean, it’s just the two of us- not saying that we’ll be in there *together*, right? I’m just saying that we’re the only ones in the room, so it wouldn’t hurt to, like, try to build one?”

George stares at him with a weird look and Dream didn’t blame him. “What?”

“It’s, um, it’s just us-”

“No, no, I know that,” George says and he draws his knees closer to his chest like he was physically hiding himself from Dream.

“I think it’ll be fun! You can...you know, teach me...?” *This is painful.*

“I could,” George says. He was frowning, though.

“C’mon, Georgie-” The nickname rolls off Dream’s tongue way too easily, “-you brought it up and Isla doesn’t have anything planned,” *Because of you*, “so let’s just build your weird little childhood fort...together.”

“Together, right.” George doesn’t move from his spot.

“Unless you wanted to do-”

“Can you shut up for a second? I’m thinking,” George snaps. Though he flashes Dream a lazy smile, it doesn’t meet his eyes and his voice didn’t sound very happy. But, Dream shuts his mouth and looks back to the sea. He could hear the imaginary ticking of his phone’s alarm.

*Maybe I could do it then...I mean, sure, it’s in the room, but it’s during a soft moment, right? George can’t be mad when we’re fort building, Dream thought, making a face. This is hard. Who even builds forts anymore? They’re cool, but I doubt anyone actually-*

“Okay,” George says, ending Dream’s mental conversation, “we can build a fort, *but* I do all the building, okay? You just hand the pillows and stuff.”

“Sounds good.”

“And we go in there one at a time, got it?”

Another knife in Dream’s chest. “Of course. Why’d you need to think about that so long?”

“I’m being careful,” George says simply. He hops off the bench and turns, watching with lifting eyes as Dream stands up.

“With what?”

“With you.”

**4 p.m**

**Nine hours remaining...**

George sucked at building forts. Like... *really* sucked.

“George, come on,” Dream sighs. He was standing in the corner of their room, arms full with the plush pillows they found, and he was watching George try to weigh down the corner of the blanket with a TV remote. “That’s not gonna work.”

“It’s gonna work!” George argues. He places the remote down and the white blanket holds its place, draping easily over the space between the foot of the bed and the TV stand. Dream’s eyebrows raise in slight surprise as it holds and George grins.

“I take it back,” Dream says.

George, painfully slowly, crawls under the blanket and lays on the floor. His friend stares up at it. “I *told* you it would work-”

The blanket slips and lands on George’s face.

Dream holds back laughter as it flutters around George’s body and outlines his defeated frame. “George?” His voice shakes.

George shoots up and yanks the blanket down. “Come on! It totally worked, you saw that!”

“Can I please help?”

“No! No, no, no! I got it!”

“George, you’ve been trying that for at least twenty minutes,” Dream points out, “the TV remote isn’t heavy enough to keep the-”

“I know, but it’ll work!”

Dream sighs and puts the pillows on their empty bed. “We’ve been doing this forever now and we still don’t have the tent set up yet. Can I *please* help?”

“No.”

“George.”

“You agreed that I would build and-”

“That was before I knew that you sucked at this!”

“I’m doing my best!”

“Well, it’s not enough! Let me help, idiot!”

Dream storms over and yanks the cloth out of George’s hands, looking for something heavier to place on top of the corner. George didn’t protest against Dream’s help, but continued to glare at him from the floor like he was six years old.

*We need books or something. Argh, I don’t think we brought any either...wait-*

“George, can you lift the TV up a bit?”

“I can.”

Dream waits a few seconds, but George doesn’t come up to help. It takes a lot of willpower not to roll his eyes as he says, “Okay, well, *will* you lift it up?”

George gives a loud and annoyed groan, but following Dream’s directions, he helps tilt the TV back and Dream shoves the blanket corner under it. George lowers it back down, and for the first time since they started, they got the tent to stay up.

“I could’ve done that,” George says.

“But you didn’t, did you?”

“Sorry for not wanting to mess with the resort’s TV and get in trouble-”

“Why do you always think we’re gonna get in trouble?” Dream asks, grabbing the pillows again. “George, we’re not gonna get caught.” It’s hard to look at George knowing that he was the one who got them in trouble in the first place, so Dream smooths the wrinkles in the pillows.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do! They don’t care here. The only time we could possibly get into trouble is if one of us tells-”

There’s a sharp knock on the door and it was a good thing it cut off Dream’s thought- anger at George’s unbreakable poker face made his muscles tight and his blood hot. He was letting his frustration get the better of him, so he gladly turned away to answer the door.

“Isla,” Dream says. He looks back at George and opens the door wider. His friend’s eyes widen a fraction, but he stays seated under the tent.

“Hey, y’all, um-” she says with a small laugh. “I just...needed to grab Dream real quick- hello, George.”

“Hi, Isla,” George says. Dream hated how steady his voice was. His grip tightens on the door handle.



“What the heck is happenin’ in here?” She asks, gazing at the tent. Her eyes dart from George to the pillows to the empty bed and then to Dream for an explanation.

“George wanted to build a fort.”

“You- no! You pushed me into making one, I didn’t want to-” George says and Dream talks over him, repeating their conversation and Isla shakes her head, raising her hand to keep them quiet.

“Okay! Okay, sorry I asked, that was a touchy subject apparently,” she says, “George, I need Dream for two seconds out here, alright?”

George’s eyes linger on her. “Okay. I’ll keep building.”

“Kay,” Dream responds and he steps out into the hall. *I guess Isla told George she wouldn’t say anything because no way George would be that calm knowing she wanted to talk to me.*

“How’s it goin’, Dream?” Isla asks in a low voice.

He bites his cheek. “It’s...going.”

“You haven’t told him, have you?”

“No,” he says.

“Dream-”

“It’s hard! Every moment I get, he gets distracted or it just doesn’t come out.”

She rubs her face, careful not to smudge her eyeliner. “Okay, sweetie...okay...” She goes silent for a while, her eyes searching the floor for the words to say. “I know it’s hard and I really hate putting a slow burn love like yours on a time crunch, but Dream-”

“I know, I know,” he glances at his phone and watches a few seconds slip away. “I’m running out of time.”

“Stop worrying. He’s George. He’ll come around.” she says gently.

Dream looks back at their door to their room. “You think he will?”

“I know he will.”

“Is now a good time, though? I mean, what if he asks-”

“If he asks questions, you answer them. Stop making excuses. And, Dream,” Isla places a hand on his shoulder, shaking it lightly, “stop thinking there’s a good time. You’re in the Florida Keys and at one of the most romantic places in America with your best friend- any time is the right time.”

She gives a quick, encouraging squeeze before starting to walk away. Dream watches her stroll down the hall and then just as she rounds the corner, he calls out to her. She stops and turns and Dream doesn’t have to say anything because she knows. She knows how it is to love someone so much to the point of fear. Isla gives him a warm smile.

*“El amor no respeta la ley, ni obedece a rey,”* is all she says before she disappears.

Love has no rules.

Maybe that was the issue: Dream was following all of George's rules before, and now, he was following his own stupid made-up rules to say three words. This entire vacation has been filled with clearly marked lines and self-control and those were the very things love didn't follow. That's why Dream's murky water finally cleared when he went against them. He was with George and he needed to do something about it.

Dream swallows.

Then he opens the door.

"George?" The door creaks closed behind him. Dream peers around the now empty room. *Shit. Did he hear?* "Hey, George?"

No answer, so Dream creeps in further. He ducks to check under their fort.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he calls into the room, looking for his friend. The bathroom door was wide open and the lights were off, so he wasn't in there. *Under the bed?* Dream squats down. "If you heard any of that, I am sorry, George."

Dream hears something in the room and he holds still. Dream's phone lights up on his nightstand and an eerie breeze makes the curtains dance. The room was getting darker from the storm clouds and his phone burned his eyes as he looked at the notification. It was a text message from George.

*colder*

"What...?" Dream said. He begins to move away from the nightstand. "George, come on, let's just build the fort already-"

*colder again*

Dream does a slow spin. Their room wasn't big and Dream checked all of the possible hiding spots George could disappear to, but his friend was nowhere to be found.

"George? Seriously, where are you? I can't find you!" Dream calls into the empty room. There's a slight whistle of wind and then Dream's phone buzzes again.

*georgenotfound LOL*

Dream groans and shuts the phone off. He walks back to their door, trying to get a better view of their entire room to check again. "This better not be some big set up so you could make that joke-"

Then something slams into Dream's face and he stumbles back, grabbing the walls to regain his balance. All he could hear was George's gleeful laughter and there's another punch of pillow in his face, smashing his cheek into the wall as he's beaten into it.

"George-" *Thump*. "George, stop-" *Thump, thump*. "Stop!" Dream snatches the pillow from George and reels it back, swinging it against George's face and making his friend's face turn sharply to the side. George stands there in shock for a second, eyes wide and his fingers touch his cheek.

"You hit me," George says.

"Well...Yeah," Dream's voice falters. "You wouldn't stop."

George looks at him with those big brown eyes. "That kinda hurt."

"Oh, please, it's a pillow-"

“You swung it really hard.”

“You backed me into the *wall*. Suck it up.” George’s eyes harden and he turns on his heel. “Oh, seriously? You’re gonna get mad because I gave you a taste of your own medicine?”

George doesn’t respond and Dream makes the stupid decision to follow him, grabbing at his arm and shirt to get him to stop walking away. But George was making a fast break to the bed where the rest of the pillows laid, and grabbing one with tight fists, Dream realizes too late that he was lured and George whips around, hitting Dream in the stomach.

The breath whooshes out of his lungs when Dream is hit, but he manages to raise his weapon high above his head and slap George again. This earns him a hard hit in the side of the head and a smirk from George that makes him mad.

“You don’t want to start this,” Dream warns, pushing George’s pillow down. George leans in slightly, the smirk not fading a bit.

“Or what, Dreamie? You’re gonna hit me?”

Dream licks his lips and his anger was able to keep him from balling up George’s shirt in his fist and kissing him right there. “I’m gonna do something far worse,” he mutters.

George’s eyebrow twitches in curiosity. “Like what?”

“You really wanna find out?”

“Maybe I do.”

A new feeling stirs in Dream’s stomach that makes his body hot and he holds onto his pillow tighter. George stared directly into his eyes, daring Dream to respond to that and knowing damn well he couldn’t. *The cocky motherfucker.*

“Well,” Dream finally says with a huff of laughter, “maybe you can find out another time.”

Then going against what his body was screaming to do, Dream pulls away and stands up straight, tucking the pillow neatly under his arm. George, not expecting Dream to back away, blinks and the smirk falls off of his face. Clearly, he was testing to see if Dream would cave because George is an ass like that. But Dream knew his tricks and he knew he was better than that.

George recovers and responds by hitting Dream again. There was a new strength to the hits and Dream was perfectly fine using his new energy to swing right back at him and it didn’t take long until they were beating each other around the room. George tries to lock himself in the bathroom, but Dream stuck his arm through the small crack just as George closed it, and he wiggled his way in and chased George out of there.

While Dream got a few good hits (one of them sent George tripping straight into the wall), George was small and managed to sneak around him a lot. The back of Dream’s head was a giant target for George as white fluff sent Dream’s head flying forward. It was a never-ending fight as the two tried to one-up each other with hits- keeping track of headshots and surprise attacks as time went down the drain and Dream forgot what Isla said.

“You’re dead!” George shouts as he scurries onto the bed, getting the high ground. He stands tall and out of breath as Dream whacks at his legs.

“Don’t stand on our bed, idiot! You’re gonna get it dirty!” There’s a weak whack at the top of his

head.

“Shut up!”

Dream sees red and he drops his pillow, making a dive for George's legs. Dream yanks his friend's legs out from under him and George falls flat on his back, half of his body hanging off the bed, and Dream keeps a strong hand on the center of George's chest to keep him pinned. George tries to twist for his lost pillow, but Dream reaches over his hand and grabs it before him. Dream raises it high above his head and George flinches from anticipated impact.

But Dream stares down at him, completely winded and out of shape, and he lowers the weapon.

George was looking up at him with his chin tilted back so his eyes were hidden under his eyelashes. Dream can feel his friend's heart pounding against his palm and George's face was glowing from the fight. Dream leans down a bit further, keeping George pinned, and he keeps his unnerved face on as he gets close enough to see the faint blemish on George's hairline.

George's eyes flick down Dream's face like he was watching a pinball machine before settling on his lips.

Dream smiles. *Got you.*

“George, I love-” He's cut off with a mouth full of cotton as George shoves the pillow into Dream's face.

Dream hacks when he tastes the gross detergent of the pillowcase and that makes George laugh wildly, throwing his head back against the mattress. The fucker managed to grab the pillow out of Dream's hands *and* choke him with it. All before Dream could say three words! Three! Words!

Dream's flushed heat turns angry as his frustration grows more.

It doesn't help that George shoves Dream off of him, unbothered and uncaring about what Dream was going to say. In fact, it seemed like George didn't even hear him, and his friend kneels down in front of the fort. George tosses the pillow he used to hit Dream under the draped blanket.

“George,” Dream says, voice sharp. “Really?”

“What?”

Dream squats in front of the opening of the fort, glaring at George inside. “You shoved a pillow in my mouth.”

“You were getting too close.”

“We were *fighting*.”

George makes a noise that sounds like a weird mixture between a grunt and a scoff. “Okay, Dream, and what should we do when we get too close? Fighting or not.”

“Move away.”

“And what didn't you do?”

“...Move away.”

“Exactly,” George laughs, but it's empty. “Hand me that pillow behind you?”

Dream does. "I can taste soap in my mouth," he says, making a gross face as he smacks his lips.

"You deserve it."

"You are so mean, George, you know that, right?"

"No, that's a new one," his friend says, lining the pillows up next to each other to create a plush sea around him. He settles down and sits against the bed's footboard, leaning forward a bit to meet Dream's eyes. Dream looks away. "Hey," he says a bit softer, "if the taste bothers you that much, I have some gum in my bag."

"No, I'm okay, it's not the taste." *It's you.*

George goes quiet, his eyes falling to the carpet under him. He doesn't say anything. Dream had every chance to blurt those three, soap-tasting, words right now, but for some reason, he doesn't. He sits on the floor and listens to the wind outside. George opens his mouth suddenly, like he was going to ask what it was then, but then his lips press together, and Dream hangs his head.

"You know," Dream says, "it's funny."

"What is?"

"This whole thing. I mean, fake dating? Come on, that was a stupid idea."

George smiles a bit. "I told you it was pretty dumb."

"I've been having weird dreams and I've been so tired all the time. And hungry."

"I've been confused, like, ninety percent of the time here," George jokes and Dream chuckles.

"Me too...Too bad we can't tell anyone about this, right?" Dream's eyes flick to George. His friend's jaw clenches.

"It *would* make for a funny story, huh?"

"It would. Fake dating..." Dream laughs to himself. "Who came up with that?"

"You did, idiot."

"*Fake dating*," he repeats. "You know, I feel like real dating would be a lot better."

George's smile falters and he's unresponsive. A cold expression settles in his eyes as he looks away and to the glass doors on the other side of the fort. Dream's heat sinks like a ship. At least he knew what direction he and George were headed in now.

"It's clearing up," George finally says. He doesn't dare to look at Dream and he doesn't blame his friend.

"Is it?"

George nods. "I saw some hammocks down on the porch when we were swinging."

"Are you done with the fort?" Dream asks. They look at the dangling blankets and pillow littering floor.

"I guess so."

The conversation was getting dry and Dream's body was hurting. "You wanna go outside then?"

"Better than here."

For some reason, the words bruise Dream and he can't help but wince as George stands up, waiting in an icy silence for Dream to grab their room key. He could tell George was upset by Dream's words, but he didn't want to cause problems, so George was biting his tongue, and it was almost worse than them fighting. Dream thought he finally got through George's walls.

He didn't get through anything.

Dream takes a deep breath and checks his phone one last time, watching as a minute disappears, and then he locks their door behind them.

**5:15 p.m**

**Eight hours remaining...**

"It's a dinosaur," George says.

Dream's eyes drift to the sky, watching a fat gray cloud cover the sun for a second before it carries on. Dream thought it looked more like a tea kettle, but he nods.

George points to another one. "Then there's a car..."

"A cat, too," Dream adds.

George turns his head to look at Dream. The hammock made their bodies fold into one another with ankles tangled around each other and shoulder joints biting into their skin. Dream was warm from George's body curling into his as they laid in the cloth, swaying with the strong breeze as they squinted up at the sun. Dream didn't have to roll in the hammock right next to George- he could've easily laid with his head at the other end, but he didn't want to. He didn't care if he was being obvious. He wanted George to know.

"A cat?" George says softly. He didn't need to yell when Dream was right there, heads knocking together from the hammock's forced closeness. Their breaths mingle as Dream looks at him.

"Yeah," Dream says and he points up to the sky, George's bright eyes following his finger. "You have the ears..." Dream traces them against the dull blue of the sky, "Then there's the face...the tail..."

"I see a turtle."

"Where?"

George reaches his hand up next to Dream and without saying a word, he traces a shell and flippers and head. Dream smiles and grabs George's finger.

"No, no- ears...and then a tail," Dream practically whispers to George, using his friend's own finger to redraw the cat.

"Oh." George's voice was heavy and lazy. "I guess it is a cat."

"Of course it is."

George cranes his neck to look back at Dream. The direct eye contact makes Dream's heart swell and the corner of his lips twitch up. He can't help but smile whenever he sees George. He was a fool. A stupid, careless, lovesick fool.

"Cloud gazing is so weird," George mutters.

"Why? Because even though it's the same cloud, we see it differently?"

George shakes his head and gives a gentle shoulder nudge. "Because it's just staring at clouds, Socrates."

"That's a boring answer."

"Sometimes the answer is simple, Dream."

"What's your answer?"

"For what?"

Dream drops George's hand and his fingertips brush George's jaw. George's nose twitches, but there's no room to pull away. Dream's frustration was becoming a new boldness that made his hands get a mind of their own- his body fighting against his brain as his heart completely takes over. His world was tinted with pink as the day grew with his love.

"You know I lo-"

"Dream," George's voice cracks on his name. Dream stops talking. "What do you see?"

Dream's hand retreats from George's face and settles back on his chest. Together, they gaze up at the approaching storm and the stray clouds racing in front of it. One cloud covers the sun and shines yellow.

Dream looks at it for a moment before saying, "I see a heart."

George makes a noise that sounds like a hum. "I see a brain. A big blob."

"It's a cloud. Of course it's gonna look like a blob."

George laughs and the wind carries it until it dissolves into the ocean waves.

Dream's body is heavy in the hammock as it hangs low over the white sand. The ocean wasn't too far from them- if Dream lifted his head he could see the churning waves just on the horizon- but they were completely alone out here. The resort music couldn't reach them and everyone settled inside the hotel walls for the storm. Couples that were once dancing on the beach disappeared like sand ghosts. George was here with Dream, but Dream never felt so left out.

"What are you thinking about?" Dream mumbles, body sinking deeper into the cloth.

George doesn't look at him, but he wastes no time responding. "I'm thinking about how tired I am."

"Tired?"

"I'm..." George starts to say, but something stops him as his own sigh cuts him off. "Nevermind."

Dream looks back up towards the sky, letting the salty, humid air lick his skin. "If you want, you

can sleep- I'll wake you up."

When George doesn't respond for a few minutes, Dream glances at him and finds his friend tucked into the hammock cloth, his face peacefully still. Wind that smells sweet makes his brown hair flutter down into his eyes, so Dream gently tucks it back, careful not to wake him up. Dream watches him with a dull, longing ache in his bones.

It was going to be so hard for Dream to let him go when this is over.

The air becomes cold as a strong gust of wind blows their hammock and George shudders a bit, sleepily wrapping his arms around himself. Dream, being the smart one here and wearing his hoodie, drapes his arm over George to keep his friend warm as he sleeps and Dream knew it was wrong, but George was an addiction. His friend's touch made him feel euphoria and Dream couldn't help himself but pull George just a *bit* closer to him, pressing his forehead against George's temple. George's shuddering stopped as Dream held him.

Then George relaxed against him, giving into Dream's body heat, and Dream lightly drew flowers on George's arm.

"I love you, you know," Dream whispers into George's ear. George didn't even twitch. His friend was fast asleep in his arms. "I wish you would've known that sooner."

Dream's eyelids get heavy as clouds continue to pass, each one getting bigger and grayer, but he tries so hard to stay awake. He promised George he would wake him up. It was the only promise Dream could keep at this point.

He checks his phone. He had time. He still had hours.

*Fifteen minutes*, Dream decided. *I'll wake up in fifteen minutes.*

Dropping his phone, Dream closes his eyes, and drowns.

**5:46 p.m**

**??? hours remaining...**

Time slipped away.

Dream didn't wake up and neither did George as they swung in that cloth hammock, wrapped in each other's arms with heads pressed together. They didn't wake up when thunder rumbled gently above them. They didn't wake up when the tide swelled- making the waves crash angrily on the shore as a warning. A warning that the time is closing in on them and Dream was close to breaking another promise he made.

Unspoken words of love made the sand stir in the surf and the sky turn dark.

Everything was murky.

The ocean and the universe were linking together in the dark, working together to brew a storm that was about to explode and make the earth pay for keeping their secrets.

Yet, they slept. Minutes turned into hours. The sleep that they couldn't seem to get finally caught up with them. Dream had a dreamless sleep and George let go of the rules he desperately kept track



of. When they were together, Dream cleared George's storm and George soothed Dream's rough waters. They were tired of fighting both each other and themselves. Bodies so worn that they caved into each other, drinking up the delicious sleep they needed.

The resort didn't have any rules for staying outside on the hammocks and people didn't want to wake a pair of strangers cuddled together- hell, people didn't even *know* that they were out there in the first place. No one came looking for them. Not even Isla.

So, time slipped.

And slipped.

...and slipped.

**11:56 p.m**

**Four minutes remaining...**

*Plink.*

Dream's nose itched.

*Plink, plink.*

Now his legs itched.

*Plink, plink, plonk.*

Something hit his forehead and Dream stirs, swiping at his skin mindlessly and he didn't open his eyes until he felt it again. Dream groans softly and blinks his eyes open, seeing nothing but an inky blackness of ocean staring back at him.

"What the f-" A freezing raindrop smacks the top of his head. Dream gasps and looks around him, dread sinking deep into his stomach until he felt like he was going to throw up. The storm was here and so dense, the moon didn't dare to show its face in the sky. The covered porch of the resort was a decent distance away- a golden halo in the dark- and Dream can see a few people sitting on the furniture, watching the storm roll in. They couldn't see Dream and George. They were too far out and in the dark to care about.

George.

*Shit.*

"George!" Dream yells, smacking his friend in the chest as he sits up in the hammock, almost tilting them. "Wake up!"

The rain was coming down faster now. "What?" George mumbles. Raindrops hit his face and wake him up, his eyes widening as he scrunches his nose against the water.

"Get up, it's raining and-" Dream's heart was pounding. "My phone. Where's my phone?"

"What? Why do you need-"

"Move! *Move!*"

Dream shoves his hands into the dip of the hammock, searching for his lost phone and he practically shoves George off it in his pursuit, but he grabs it. The battery was almost dead and blinked red at him. The screen lit up in the darkness and Dream read the timer.

*Three minutes.* There were three minutes left in the day.

“George, I have to tell you something,” Dream says. The rain hurt his skin as he sat in the hammock and Dream shuddered. George takes his time rolling out of it.

“I thought you were going to wake me up?”

“I was, but I fell asleep too,” Dream explains quickly, “but George, please, can you wait just a second-”

“Can we get inside first?” George asks. The rain was heavy now and Dream can hear each drop hit the water like a gunshot.

“No! It’ll take just a minute.”

“I’m cold,” George shivers. He starts to walk away from the hammock and Dream throws himself out of it, scurrying to his friend.

“*George! Stop!*” He calls. He falls to the sand in his scramble and George whips around.

“What is your issue? Are you okay?”

“George, I lo-”

George groans. “Dream, we could be inside by now- let’s just walk and-”

“Shut up! Shut up, George!”

“Dream?! What the hell?” George yells, reeling back. “It’s raining, can we just go inside before we get sick and then you can say whatever you need to-”

“I have to do it now,” Dream says, throat getting tight. George’s eyebrows furrow.

“What? What are you-”

Dream’s heart pounds loudly as lightning strikes above them and Dream can see George’s terrified expression in the quick burst of light. Rain makes his hair stick to his face as it runs down his cheeks and jaw. Dream’s clothes clung to his shaking body as he took a step to his friend. There was sand sticking to his legs and hands.

“George,” he starts, “I’ve been trying to tell you all day.”

George takes a step back. “Dream, what-”

“And I’m *sorry*, okay? I am,” Dream cuts him off.

“Can’t this wait? We’re getting soaked out here.”

“There’s no more time *to* wait,” Dream laughs weakly, pushing his hair back and yanking on it. “I ran out.”

“What do you mean?”

Dream reaches George, and with a trembling voice and body, he looks at him. "George."

George shakes his head desperately. "Dream, please, I can't... *we* can't- I don't-"

"I want to."

"Stop. Please stop."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't- this wasn't supposed to happen!" George's chest is heaving in a panic and rain clings to his cheeks. "*Dream*- I'm not-"

"*George, I love you!*" Dream cries out.

Then his timer goes off.

## Chapter End Notes

haven't done a cliffhanger in a while and decided that this was a good time to do one :)

what do u guys think???? haha jk i already know

# eight

## Chapter Notes

hi besties

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

**June 19**

**12:01 a.m**

Dream's pounding heart is muted by the raindrops above. His wet clothes weighed his bones down and set a sharp cold shock to his core, making his body shiver against the storm. The sky above them was black and the only light around was the orange emergency light glowing behind George's head- drowning the wild beach and rain with a warm glow. Everyone had already left and it was only them standing outside.

He can see the rapid and shallow pants enter and leave George's body, his face twisted in pure pain at the words hanging in the air between them. His dark hair hung straight against his forehead and into his eyes and the rain clung to his eyelashes. There was a sharp line between his furrowed eyebrows, his mouth gritted like someone had just punched him. George looked seconds away from shattering and all Dream could do was watch.

"That's not fair," George finally says, his voice hoarse and broken. The waves behind Dream swell and crash loudly when he draws in a sharp breath.

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

The sky rumbles and cracks above them, but neither seem to react to it. The sky and sea churn against each other- a constant battle of pushing and pulling forces stirring the air and it wouldn't stop until one of them gave in. The seawater was black. The sky covered itself with thick clouds. Both of them had retreated their secrets back into themselves and, in some way, Dream felt himself sink back into his depths- staring helplessly up at the surface of his soul as he dragged himself back down, a weak, desperate hand reaching towards something that could've been.

All because George was right. He wasn't sorry.

Dream closes his mouth, swallowing. "George, we can't keep doing this."

"No. No! You don't get to- that's not fair either, Dream!" George cried out. A flash of lightning branches in the clouds and lights up the beach, revealing blue tears streaking down George's jaw and mixing in the rainwater on his shirt. "You keep...just *pushing* me and I thought we were finally done. I thought we were done with this and now, what, you're back to having that stupid look on your face!"

"I don't know what-"

"You can't say you love me and then go and leave me. You can't say you love me and then say we

can't keep doing this when it's been *you* doing it the whole time!" George's voice was cracking on his words, but the anger in them struck Dream deep in his chest and squeezed at his heart. "I'm done, Dream. You keep-" His friend sucks in a dry sob, "You keep giving me hope."

Dream doesn't dare speak. George was right again.

George stands there for a minute, wrapping his arms tightly around himself in a pathetic display of comfort. Yet, his brown eyes lift to Dream's almost expectantly- like he was waiting for an answer. Waiting for Dream to say he's wrong and he's being an idiot.

With a weak, desperate hand, Dream starts to reach for him, but when a wave breaks on the shore, he drops it back to his side and stands stoic. George was wrong- Dream did love him. He always did. But, George was nothing but the moon above the ocean's horizon now- he's always been out of Dream's reach and he was the idiot for thinking that George would stick around long enough to play into his game. Truthfully, Dream didn't know what he really wanted.

Another wave of pain slams into Dream's gut when George's face drops even further. "Alright," George says weakly, "okay, I'll just- I'll see you in the morning."

George turns his back on Dream and the rain pounds against his skin harder than ever- the force feeling like dull punches and the sand starts to sink underneath him. Dream was standing in George's storm, but he was the one clinging to his own perspective.

Sweet rainwater fills his mouth as Dream cranes his neck back to look at the spinning sky above him. He no longer could see the moon and stars. He no longer could see supernova colors behind his eyes. Nothing but a dark, mysterious void was above him, and that's when he realized that he never knew George. He knew the George he created in his own mind. For some reason, that fact didn't bother him. Instead, Dream sent a watery smile to the storm and felt the rumble of thunder vibrate in his bones.

Dream sinks further into himself and his head pounds from the pressure. He held his breath and let the weight of his ignorance hit his sandy bottom and that was the first time Dream felt truly alone in himself. No stars glimmering above him. No sun to guide him out of himself. Just him and the deep sea.

A chuckle escapes his lips and salty tears blur his vision. "*Fuck.*"

**8:48 a.m**

After the storm, the world came back alive.

Sea birds soared across the orange and purple sky and rode the storms fading wind together. The dunes looked green and lush and plants stretched up to soak in the approaching daylight, wavering gently as if to say good morning. The sand had dried and returned to its brilliant white. Flat, soft clouds floated silently above the resort and pulled the spilling colors of the sunrise behind them. The ocean seemed to buzz with a quiet hum of life as its silt settled back down and its wildlife returned to the shallows once again. After the storm, everything recovered. Everything resumed as planned.

Dream had the blessing of watching it all, too.

Not having the courage to return back to their room, he had taken shelter on the porch that held the swinging chair he and George had sat in just days ago. He rocked himself gently and stared at the sky until dawn started to break on the horizon. Dream didn't sleep. He didn't cry. He sat and

rocked in his clothes, which turned stiff from the dried sand and water. Even when his face dried up and his scalp itched, Dream didn't move.

A long, quiet breath escapes his lips and he presses his temple against the woven cage of the seat. Despite the damage he had caused, Dream didn't feel regret or embarrassment. He just felt numb.

It didn't take long for people to come out of the resort with their hands filled with plates of food and warm cups of coffee. The day had turned cool from the storm and Dream didn't even realize the goosebumps on his skin until he shuddered, watching a couple curl up against each other to gaze out at the energetic sea. There's a tug at his heartstrings and it's sour. Dream really thought he could fall in love here.

*Who's fault is that?* He thought bitterly, closing his eyes to hide the cringe on his face. *This is what I get for listening to Isla- no, no, no, actually, this is what I get for being a jerk. And Isla. It's a mixture of both.* Dream sits there for a second before sighing to himself.

It felt better placing some of the blame on someone else, so even though he knew it was his own fault, Dream sat back up and felt his anger flare up at the thought of Isla's stupid compromise.

Speaking of Isla- Dream had to go find her to update her on the outcome so they didn't get thrown to the curb.

Dream forces himself up out of the chair, ignoring the judgemental looks from the couples around him, and makes his way to the front desk where the workers all buzzed about the nasty storm that had just happened. Dream left sand and salt in his wake and he smelled horrible, but it was hard to care when he just had his friendship crushed in the hands of Isla.

"I need to talk to Isla," Dream tells one of the workers. She looks at him, eyeing his rugged state, before picking up a phone behind the desk. Dream hears chatter on the other end and she gives a pointed look at him.

"Your name?"

"Dre- uh, Clay," he answers.

"Yeah, it's that boy we saw out in the storm last night," she says into the phone. She gives a hum of curiosity and listens to Isla's chatter before giving a nod. "You got it. I'll send him back now."

Dream's face flushed with humiliation. *Were people watching us? What the hell.*

"Come this way, sir," she continues, oblivious to Dream's sheepish state, and she leads him behind the counter, scanning her badge into the office that sat just to the side. She holds open the door for him and says, "Good luck."

Then, the door shuts and Dream walks himself over to Isla's cubicle. She sat straight and confident, her dark hair hanging in loose waves down her back, and like a sixth sense, she turned around just as Dream made it to the spare chair behind her. Her lips were painted a deep red and she had a thick file ready on her crossed knees. Her fingers clutched the top of it as she leaned forward to him and there was something about her demeanor that intimidated Dream.

"Hi there, Dream, take a quick seat, hun," she purrs out, pointing to the chair. He takes a seat and fights off the weird déjà vu he was having.

"I did it," he tells her. No use in dancing around the topic.

“Yeah, last minute too, huh?”

“Lost track of time.”

“Mm, I’m sure,” she says and there’s an underlying blow to it. Dream didn’t care though- he just drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair and waited for her to say what she needed to.

“Everyone in the resort was wonderin’ what y’all were doin’ in that storm last night. I just told them it was just a petty couple’s fight.”

“Thank you so much,” Dream deadpans.

“It was either that or blab to everyone that we both breached protocol, so your pick.” Dream stares her down and her lips tug down in a small frown. “Well, for someone who just confessed his love, you don’t seem very chipper.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it sucked,” he admits. “I told you, there’s a reason why I never said it.”

“He didn’t take it too well?”

“No, obviously not.”

“George doesn’t seem like the soft romantic guy. I’m sure he-”

“No.” Dream had to stop her because he could already tell she was getting the wrong idea. “It went bad, okay, Isla? I just wanted to know if we could stay.”

She eyes him, but the grip on the folder doesn’t loosen. “You can stay. A deals a deal.”

“Okay-”

“But,” she cuts him off and it takes everything in Dream not to roll his eyes, “this whole attitude won’t fly with the crew, ‘kay?”

“So then just have us leave.”

“Can’t do that, sweetie, I still have a project to complete and a job to do. Now, I don’t know what happened between you and George, but assumin’ that he knows about our deal, y’all need to-”

“He doesn’t.”

“Pardon?”

“I didn’t tell him that you *made* me tell him I love him.”

Isla’s eyes widen and her red mouth drops slightly. “Oh...no.”

“Yeah.”

“And- and you said he didn’t take the whole thing good either.”

“Yep.”

“I am starting to see the issue,” she says. That made Dream give her a forced smile and she cursed under her breath, looking back towards her computer in thought. “Alright...alright, that’s fine, we can work with that.”

“How?”

“You are gonna patch things up with him...and, uh, darn it- I didn’t even think about the not telling him part,” she gnaws on her lips and hits the folder with her hands. “You won’t tell him, okay? It’s just two more days.”

Dream considers this. It’s not like he had a problem not mentioning the fact that Isla influenced his confession, but the patching things up part was going to be a bit of an issue.

“I mean, I’m pretty sure George is out of this thing completely,” Dream tells her. “He told me he was done with me in general, so-” he punctuates his sentence with a shrug.

“You’re taking that surprisingly well.”

“Just a petty fight, right?”

Isla rolls her eyes at him and leans forward to put a hand on his knee. “I like you, okay? You got your heart in the right place. I want you guys to figure your baggage out and it sounds like George has some skeletons in his own closet, too.”

“Sure.”

“Or maybe,” she pulls back and her eyebrow raises, “you’re not being completely honest with the whole thing.”

*How?* Dream thought simply. *Am I that easy to read?* “What do you mean?”

“George can’t just be *done* with you, sweetie, I’ve seen y’all interact for almost a week now. Even when I wasn’t directly with you, I saw that connection. For George to just be done is extremely unlike him.”

Dream lowers his eyes.

“You can salvage this. You just need to admit, maybe, you pushed him too much with all of this and I’m sure he’ll come around and help us out.”

*“You keep...just pushing me.”*

George’s voice stings like lemon juice in a paper cut and Dream closes his eyes like he was hiding himself from the memory. Dream just wanted a free vacation, he didn’t expect the extra drama to join them.

“It’s...ugh, nevermind,” Dream says. *It’s not the pretending that pushed him.*

“Alright, sweetie, go get him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We got kayaking at noon, alright? Dress for the weather!” Isla calls out to him as he walks out of the office and he throws a quick thumbs up over his shoulder before letting the door slam on his way out. He was starting to get really tired of fixing everything.

The walk back to the room was pretty quick considering the fact that Dream’s numbness had melted into annoyance, which made his legs take longer, faster strides. He punched the elevator button with more force than necessary and slapped leaves out of his way as he stormed back to the room, digging into his pocket for the hotel key. His fingers skimmed the bottom of his shorts



pockets and were met with loose sand.

*Oh my fucking God.* Of course he lost the key. Of course he was going to have to face George right then. It's not even Dream's fault for having his stupid feelings- even with Isla's compromise, he was honest with George and if anything it was unfair of George to get mad at him for feelings he can't help.

It was a long stretch, he knows. But he wasn't ready to sift through the sand.

Dream's fist pounds on the door. "George?" He pauses and listens to the dead silent room. His eye twitched and he slammed on the door again. "George! I know you're in there- let me in!" He pounds on the wood some more.

Still nothing.

"Oh my *God*, I'm sorry, okay? You can be mad, I don't care, but at least let me in because my shit is in there and I wanna shower and then you can throw your fit when I'm done," Dream spits out, knocking on each word and letting his anger burst out. His exhaustion and hurt were starting to show themselves with tiny pricks at his heart.

"Dream?"

A cool, smooth voice makes him freeze and he turns to face George standing in the doorway of the *next* door down. Dream pulls back his hand and looks at the golden plaque in the center of the white door and, sure enough, it was the wrong room number. At first, his face burns with a blush, but then his heart drops.

"Come on," George tells him, turning away and holding open the door. "So I can go back to having my fit."

Dream coughs and pushes past George inside their room, trying to ignore the fact that their fort was clearly slept in with blankets and pillows lying in a messy outline of a body. He silently bends down to his suitcase and gathers his clothes. George's eyes burn his spine.

He stands up and glances at his friend, only to find him looking away and out the windows with sadness tugging his eyes and lips down. Dream clenches his jaw, standing up. Maybe he was making up George's interest in him.

Once he locks himself in the bathroom and turns the water onto the hottest setting, he stares at his reflection in the mirror and swallows against the lump of guilt in his throat. He didn't look like himself anymore. His hair looked dull and flat, his skin dry and tight all over him. His freckles that littered his face started to look like permanent specks of dirt, like his body was keeping track of how dirty he felt on the inside at the moment. His lips were cracking and red from a faint sunburn covering his body. His green eyes didn't shimmer like the waves outside, but instead churned like the stormy sea from last night- looking like murky lake water or the smoke after a firework show. His face was held in a stiff, mute expression. His shoulder sat back in tension and his fingers held the counter with such strength, his knuckles began to hurt. Dream wasn't kissed by the summer anymore, he was ruined by it.

He peels the clothes off his body and the water boils him alive, but he takes it and stands there- counting the tiles in front of him until the salt and rain stream off his body and down the drain. Dream washed his body four times and each time he scrubbed harder than the last, fiercely rubbing last night off his skin, and he did everything in his power to hide the fact that tears of humiliation streamed down his face the whole time.

By the time he tugged on clean clothes, steam made the air heavy and hard to breathe. He leaned against the counter with his back to the mirror and rubbed his head with the towel, keeping his eyes closed until he was ready to come out.

*You know I've always loved you, George. I didn't mean to leave the first time, I didn't even know you felt like I did.*

*She was nothing compared to you. She even knew that- how could you say I left when I put you above her any time you asked?*

Dream rubs harder.

*I'm not trying to push you. I'm just trying to figure you out.*

He throws open the door and steps out into the room, his eyes finding George out on the balcony. The room was a mess and felt cold from the chilled wind drafting inside, but George didn't seem to mind as he gazed down at the couples walking up and down the beach. He barely looked at Dream when he took his place next to him.

"Isla wants us to go kayaking later," Dream says to him.

"I'm not going."

"We still have a job to do, George."

"A cruel one."

*Ouch.* "We can always forget I said it. Go back to just being friends."

George scoffs, but it's not light-hearted. "Back and forth with you, again, Dream. You love me, then you don't."

"I do."

"You love me when it's convenient for you."

"Well, if I didn't love you, would you go kayaking?" Dream jokes.

"Maybe I would've considered it."

"Then I don't."

"You always know what to say," George quips, pulling himself away from the railing. "Thanks for proving my point."

George walks back inside and Dream groans, turning around to stare at him from outside. "It was a joke, George--"

"At my expense."

"What is your issue? I'm saying we can forget about it and you're being a complete asshole."

"What's my- Dream! Are you kidding me?"

"What?"

George blinks at him. "You have no idea what I'm saying."

"I do and I don't want to fight about it. I just want to finish Isla's project and get the hell out of Key Largo."

The confession seems to hit George like a slap in the face because he reels back like he felt the contact. He had started picking up the fort on the floor and the pillow that was in his hands became squeezed between his tight clutch, his eyebrows furrowing in that familiar mark of pain. Dream licks his lips, but doesn't back down. If George didn't want to love him back, that's fine. It didn't matter. But Dream was not a fan of the cold shoulder.

"This...this was *your* idea, Dream," George says low and dangerously, " *you* wanted to have a free vacation- pretending to be boyfriends and acting like what you did wouldn't mean anything."

"What did I do, George?"

"You didn't actually love me before all of this."

As soon as the words left George's mouth, he pressed his lips together in regret and he tossed the pillow onto the bed. Dream felt the itch of confusion in the back of his brain because he did love George, he said it himself- he always did. Why was George telling him he didn't?

"You want me to go kayaking with you and Isla? Fine. I will. But no one wanted to leave Key Largo more than me."

With that, George leaves. The door slams behind him and Dream looks up to the sky, noting how the blue color seems to become grayer as the hours pass.

Dream grits his teeth. "*Fuck.*"

### 11:45 a.m

The shuttle to the mainland was almost as awkward as it was painful.

Naturally, this was an activity with a whole bunch of other couples packed into a small bus with Isla and her camera crew packed in the last few rows. George and Dream sat all the way in the front and the farthest away from Isla and her curious stare, but that didn't save them from the other couples. Everyone else seemed wrapped up with each other and since it was a longer trip- around an hour of bus time- that left a lot of time for couples to start conversing with one another. Dream liked to pretend his headphones saved him from being sucked in, but it didn't last long. George had a different plan up his sleeve.

"George, turn around," Dream begs through his teeth, still pretending to be deaf to the world around him.

"Why? Don't you wanna talk to everyone else?"

"Since when do you like talking to strangers?"

"Since you ticked me off."

Dream rolls his eyes, but tugs out his headphones and twists around, forcing a smile on his face for the cuddling couples behind them. They still had thirty minutes left in this god-forsaken trip.

"Oh, George, he's a looker," a woman comments about Dream with a toothy grin and George

scoffs.

“Trust me, he knows.”

“Oh, is he a leo?”

“I am,” Dream replies to her.

“My best friend and her husband are leos,” she comments and her husband wraps a secure arm around her, pressing a kiss to her temple. Dream’s chest twists in hidden jealousy, but he keeps his face still.

“Awesome,” is all he says.

“So, have you guys done this before?” She asks.

Dream didn’t know why she was so adamant about talking to him and George and it certainly did not ease the growing annoyance in his gut. The woman looked like the type to go outside every day- she wore bright athletic clothes and her husband had a big backpack resting at his feet. With a high pony and high voice, everything about her screamed “I kayak for fun, I’m about to brag about that.”

George beats Dream to the answer. “Dream has.”

He whips his head to George. “What.”

“Yeah!” George confirms in a mock cheerful tone before turning back to the woman. “Dream’s been to this resort, like, a thousand times. He always brings his boyfriends here for the first vacation.”

Dream’s eyes widen and the bus falls silent at the lie. The woman’s face drops, but then she forces an awkward smile on her face.

“He’s not- that’s not true-” Dream tries to defend.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you see him back here next month with another guy,” George cuts him off, even adding a nonchalant shrug to his words. Dream wanted to crawl in a hole. He wanted to throw George off the bus and make him swim back to England. Dream couldn’t even be embarrassed- he had no time to. Everyone kept beating him to the response.

“Oh, well, Dream, can you- uh, just, tell us what it’s like,” she asks awkwardly. The husband was now glaring daggers at Dream thanks to George’s lie- now he seemed like an unloyal, shallow guy in a bus full of dedicated and very much in love couples.

“It’s cool,” he sighs out in defeat. “Pretty.”

He’s never been there. He’s barely kayaked and he doesn’t even know how he can get into one with his own fake-boyfriend. Dream turns back around in his seat and sinks a bit lower, trying to cool his skin from the hot blush across his body.

“You’re lucky I didn’t tell them about your bed-wetting,” George says under his breath to him.

“You’re lucky I don’t tell them that you aren’t even in love,” Dream snaps at him, shoving his headphones back into his ears. “Fuck this up as much as you want, but keep in mind one of us actually owned up to our feelings at a *couples* resort. See who will take your side.”

He meant to sound as harsh as possible and it worked- George's eyes darkened and his cheeks turned a light shade of pink before he turned his face towards the window, watching the gray sky pass by them.

George was going to make this hard for Dream, it was easy to see. Yet, as the ride stretched on and the sea turned into grassy marshes, guilt softened Dream and he found himself tracing the side of George's face with his eyes. George was hurt with his confession because he thought Dream didn't love him before this and, as much as Dream wanted to be angry, he couldn't. George was hurting and so was he, so there was no point in fighting because that made everything so much worse.

That's when Dream came up with a new plan. He wasn't going to combat George's fire with his own, he was going to show George that there was no threat. George didn't love him and that was okay. Dream still had the opportunity to prove that his words were true.

Music plays softly in his ears and the ocean in his chest swells and rocks inside of his ribcage to the beat. His heart drums gently as he lowers his hand down to the space between him and George, their hands laying right beside each other on the scratchy purple fabric of the chairs. The ocean kicks and churns, forcing his pinky to scoot closer until it brushes against George's, and then with one final crash of a wave, Dream hooks his pinky and gives it two reassuring squeezes- their bracelets drawing together with a small clink.

A part of him expected George to rip his hand away and call him an idiot or crazy, but he didn't. George didn't move at all. He kept his hand still and he let Dream touch him.

Dream might have not been admitting the whole truth, but turns out, George wasn't either.

### 12:15 p.m

"Alright, everyone, listen up! Kayaking is not hard nor is it complicated. You will have a guide in the front and in the back of your group, so, if you get lost or stranded, that's completely on you!"

Dream barely listens to the kayaking guide as he bends over to pull his shoes off next to George. They already had a buddy system going, everyone with their partner, obviously, and quite honestly, this activity was just them paddling in a marsh for an hour or two. It was pretty straightforward, but everyone was preparing like they were about to sail across the Atlantic.

"I don't want to do this," George says to Dream once he stands back up.

"Yeah, well, I don't either," he responds. A few couples turn around at the sound of his voice and give him dirty looks. "Especially after you told them I was a shitty boyfriend."

"It's true."

"It is not," Dream argues.

George doesn't respond, but Dream earns a dry laugh instead.

"Hey, sweets," Isla says to them, wobbling over the parking lot gravel in her high heels. "Okay, so, gameplan for today is just...teamwork, okay? Lots of teamwork."

"How does this involve teamwork?" George asks.

Isla glances at Dream before answering him. "Oh, y'know, both of y'all workin' together to reach a common destination. Common goal. All that sort of jazz."

“That sucks.”

“George,” Dream warns.

“What? It does. Teamwork only works when they’re on the same page.” It’s a low blow that only Dream seemed to pick up, but he bites his tongue as George adds, “Like that obstacle course we did.”

“Obstacle course?” Isla echoes.

“Good job, idiot, you gave her an idea,” Dream tells him.

“We already did that and I’m not doing it again.”

“Okay, okay, boys, no need to be so aggressive,” Isla pleads, placing two fingers to her temple. “I just need y’all to...guys, please don’t tip the kayak or spin in circles. *Please.*”

“You got it,” Dream assures her. Isla gave him a look and it was clear what she was saying: *Don’t give people a reason to end this.*

No pressure- not like Dream was carrying this whole thing on his back anyways.

Dream lets out a long breath, trying to exhale the stress building in his chest, and Isla walks away to the loading dock where a small metal boat floats. The crew seemed to be waiting for her with heavy cameras around their necks and annoyed glares on their faces.

“What the hell was that?” Dream asks George as he throws an arm towards Isla. “She has a job to do, George.”

“A job I didn’t sign up for. Not my problem.”

“Can we please just talk? Like actually?”

George studies his face and his eyes soften around the edges, sensing Dream’s desperation to help move on from the flop of the confession.

But, he says, “I don’t really want to, Dream.”

“George-”

“I want the blue kayak,” his friend pushes on, knocking their shoulders together as he walks by Dream to force him to turn around towards the group.

“They’re all blue,” Dream mutters. He follows George, though, and waits silently as the instructor explains how to maneuver the boat and what to do if they tipped. He barely listens and breathes in the salty marsh air, tasting the salt on his lips. The spartina rustles when the wind brushes its fingers through, blowing Dream’s hair in front of his eyes and he pushes it out of his face absentmindedly. When his vision clears, his eyes catch George looking at him. Big brown eyes studying him sadly.

Dream drops his hand and lets his hair fall into his eyes again.

“Let’s get you guys in the water!” The instructor claps, ultimately turning George’s gaze away.

It takes a while, but when Dream wrestles himself into a life jacket and crawls into the front seat of the kayak, he and George finally get pushed out into the marsh with a few others. The water was

shallow since it was low tide and he could see the small oyster reefs beneath the blue plastic of the boat. His paddle dipped into the water like a knife in butter, flicking it out of the way until they were caught up with the tour guide and at a steady pace. Weirdly enough, they seemed to be doing just fine despite their rift.

Dream laid his paddle in his lap for a moment and took in everything around him. Mangrove trees twisted their roots deep into the water and when they drifted past one, Dream could see dogfish and smaller minnows retreat back to the safety of the tree. Crabs shuffled quickly underneath them and tall birds waded out of their way. The marsh was quiet and calm- nothing but the sound of water and wind filled his ears.

It was so peaceful that Dream almost didn't notice that they were headed right for a mud bank.

"George-"

"Yeah?"

Dream throws the left side of his paddle in the water and pushes against the current in an attempt to turn the nose of their kayak away from the sticky mud. Water sprays up into the boat and it was *cold*.

"Turn!" Dream shouts to George.

He hears George scramble for his paddle and in the panic, George puts the right side of his paddle down before Dream can correct him on the placement. The boat jerks to the left and continues to float right for the bank. Dream curses under his breath and tries to paddle against George's resistance.

His heart is hammering from the adrenaline and exercise. The boat was still making a beeline for the landmass, but Dream managed to turn the blue nose away just in time and the side of the kayak shys away from the mud by a few inches. In a last-ditch effort to get them away from the crash zone, Dream plants his hand firmly in the grass and mud and pushes them away. His shoulders and arms burn and ache, and he's panting by the time they rejoin the group, but he did it.

"Thanks for the help," Dream spits out, throwing a look at George as he washes his hand off.

"I didn't know what was happening!"

"Did you miss the whole island we were about to crash into?"

"I was...okay, I was zoned out, that's not my fault."

Dream just glares at him over his shoulder before going back to drifting for a moment, but he keeps his hands ready on the paddle. "Zoned out? About what?"

"About anything else."

"You know we still have to pretend to like each other, right?"

"I guess."

Dream lets out a groan and he paddles a few strokes, trying to figure out what to say to him. They were around other people, so it wasn't like Dream could drop the act around them. It was actually a good thing kayaking happened today because it took care of their pretending problem, but regardless, Dream wanted to talk to George. He slipped up so much the last twenty-four hours and

he just wanted to be done.

Up ahead, the marsh divides into two paths and something sparks behind Dream's eyelids.

"Everyone, we'll be taking the right path," the instructor says.

*No*, Dream decided, *we won't at least*.

"George lift your paddle," he whispers.

"What?"

"Take your paddle out of the water."

He can feel George watching him, but then the boat stops moving and people start to breeze by them until they're the last ones.

"You guys alright?" The second instructor asks as he passes them.

"Uh, yeah- yeah. Just...taking a breather."

"You need me to wait for you?"

"Dream?" George asks him pointedly. Dream ignored him and shook his head at the guy, waving him on.

"No, no. Go ahead. The-uh, the right path, right?"

"That would be the one," the instructor confirms.

"We're right behind you. Just need a minute."

The instructor glances between them, but finally gives them a nod and starts to paddle off. Dream lets out a breath and pretends to pick up his paddle, giving the boat a few lazy and weak strokes until the guy disappears around the bend. Dream throws his head back to look for Isla's boat and when he doesn't see it, he drives the right side of his paddle into the water and pushes the nose of the boat to the left.

"Dream!" George cries out. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not spending the next two days at each other's throats," he tells George. "If you don't want to talk, whatever, you can steer us back to everyone else yourself, but if you do, then feel free to help."

Anxiety makes Dream's heart go from hammering to racing underneath his ribs and he stops paddling for a second, unsure if he really knew what he wanted to say to George. He turns his body slightly to look back at George, his head dropping down a bit, and he presses his lips together. Dream inhales and exhales, tasting the ocean and feeling it swirl in his veins.

"I didn't- I'm not lying. I wasn't lying," Dream mumbles quietly.

George looks sympathetic for a moment- his edges softening enough for Dream to see that deep down, George didn't think he was lying. His friend's hands rest on the paddle in his lap, his fingers scratching at the plastic in an internal debate, but then his slender fingers wrap around the pole with a new determination.



Without another word, George drips his paddles into the water and helps guide the kayak to the left path.

***1:00 p.m***

The left path took them deeper into the marsh- the shallows gradually disappearing until Dream could barely see the bottom and the mangroves' roots were swallowed by the saline water.

*I loved you and I still do love you.*

*I see you in everything around me. I saw you in her.*

*I'm sorry I didn't know what my feelings were then. Or maybe I did and I was too much of a coward to admit them to you.*

"Why did you freak out?" Dream asks.

George takes a steady breath. "This was a bad idea."

"Why can't we just talk?"

"Because you're hard to talk to."

"How?"

"You ask too many questions, Dream."

"You don't ask enough, George."

"There's no questions to be asked," George says simply, syncing their strokes up together, "I just don't like this stuff."

"So how about you ask me something?"

"Why would I do that?"

"If you won't answer my questions, then I'll just have to answer yours," Dream explains.

"I guess."

"Go ahead."

"I'm thinking."

A silence fills the two and it's so quiet that Dream can hear the hum of the motor from Isla's boat somewhere around them. They were hidden in the marsh grass, their words muffled by the mud.

"Why now?" George asks.

Dream closes his eyes. He can't rat Isla out- if he did, it would make everything so much worse because then George would know it wasn't his own doing.

"I dunno," he lied, "I just knew what I felt."

"Oh."

"So, why'd you freak out?"

"I told you: you didn't love me before this place."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Dream demands. "You don't know that."

"I do, actually," George tells him.

"*How?*"

There's a laugh but it's forced. Pained. "You seriously don't remember?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be doing this."

"...Nevermind."

"George, c'mon-"

"If you don't remember then there's no need to bring it up again," George snaps at him and it makes Dream shut up. "I just...you don't expect people to just dump... *that* on you out of nowhere."

"If you told me what happened, I could explain-"

"I don't want to, Dream."

"Okay, okay." He pauses and paddles them through a narrow passage. "I'm sorry for what I did."

George doesn't respond, but he does stop paddling and so does Dream. The marsh keeps them calm and collected, but Dream didn't feel any closer than before and he only had a day and a half to figure this out.

"Do you remember what I said? That night on the beach?" George asks suddenly.

"Uh...yeah," Dream recalls, "yeah, you were saying how the stars burn out and stuff."

Brown eyes lift to meet his and they're hard and cold. "That should've been a hint."

Dream faces forward again and he could feel frustration prick at his skin. George kept telling him he was hot and cold, but George was equally so.

"I can't read your mind, George."

"I just told you what that meant."

"No, you didn't, you're doing that bullshit poetic answer thing that you did on the beach and I can't decipher what that means because it can mean literally anything. I want a straight answer from you because I am confused about what I did and I'm confused by you and I thought we actually had something, but then when I tell you I love you, you just freak out and suddenly there's a hundred other factors and I know we made that promise-"

"Dream! Oh my god, okay, relax," George stops him. Despite the annoyance, concern made his tone waver. "I- okay, it's hard to explain."

"What did I do?"

George's throat bobs and he hesitates. "You kissed me."

“...Like on the beach with Isla? Yeah, I know, but-”

“No,” George says, voice weak. “Like...we kissed way before that.”

Dream had his body fully twisted towards him and he could feel the blood drain from his face as he gaped at George. “Huh?”

“Yeah. The- it was the first time I came to Florida.” George’s fingers twist nervously around the paddle and his eyes drift to the marsh around them, an awkward smile forcing its way to his face. “We...I guess, it wasn’t exactly a kiss, but it was in your room and it was raining outside and we had stayed inside because of it.”

Dream can barely hear him over the waves crashing in his ears. *The dreams.*

He did know they kissed.

“You were...” George pauses and he laughs, his face flushing, “You were like half-asleep and you were saying all these things and I was laying in front of you and you just...I dunno, you just kissed me.”

Dream’s breath leaves his body.

“You fell asleep like two seconds later. That’s probably why you don’t really remember it.”

*Holy shit.*

Dream can’t say anything. All the words knotted in his throat and he drops his eyes to the murky water and watches the fish flicker beneath the surface in stunned horror.

“I thought- I knew I kinda liked you then and when that happened, I thought you felt the same way...then you never mentioned it again. You kept doing your thing...a-and I, um, I just moved on. But then you invite me here...and I almost instantly like you all over again and I couldn’t- I couldn’t do that to myself, okay? I made that promise for me.”

“Because you didn’t think I...”

“Yeah,” George confirms.

“Holy shit,” Dream breathes, pushing his hair out of his face. Suddenly, him confessing his love seemed a lot bigger than he intentionally planned it to be. “And then you freaked out because....because you were done.”

“I think I am done, Dream,” George admits in a quiet voice. Dream feels his heart falter and his hand falls into his lap in defeat, depression sinking deep into his bones until they strained from the weight. “I’m sorry.”

The pieces all fell together. That night Dream kissed George in his room, it was pouring rain outside- he can remember it now.

*The rain was nothing more than a blurry blanket draped outside- shielding them from the eyes of the world. He remembers how hazy George looked through his half-lidded eyes. He remembers mumbling about anything and everything in his head- he remembers talking about what their room would look like if they lived together, what George’s freckles reminded him of and, shit, he can remember babbling about space and the galaxies above them.*

*Worst of all, he can remember waking up to George sleeping and their faces unnaturally close. He remembers the tingle down his spine from the memory of them kissing, but instead, he walked out of his room and saw her sitting out on the couch in the dark- curled up and alone while he slept next to George. She never bothered them. Never woke them up. She always knew. She knew before Dream and she saw right through his lie.*

“Dream?” A hand on his shoulder sends him rushing back to reality and he’s back in that cramped kayak in the middle of the marsh. George leans forward a bit to try to meet eyes and Dream feels something wet roll down his cheek.

He quickly wipes his face and turns back around. “I fucked up, didn’t I?”

“Maybe” George admits.

“And there’s nothing I can do?”

“I can’t keep waiting, Dream.”

Dream nods. He can understand that.

The pain that he felt now *hurt* - it was a poisonous mixture of guilt, sadness, and grief at the loss of what could’ve been dissolving in his chest and turning his ocean acidic. The surface clouded completely until all he could see was the depths around him- inky, thick, smothering blackness sinking him lower into the sand. His nerves felt numb- he couldn’t bring himself to turn around and paddle back to shore- and his heart felt like a squeezed lemon in his chest, dripping that acid continuously into his blood with every pump. His bones ached. His eyes felt pressure against them. His throat felt swollen.

“Alright, just- nevermind, then,” Dream whispers. George’s hand pulls away from him.  
“Nevermind.”

George opens his mouth to say something, but then a droning hum of a motor draws closer and closer, making both of their heads lift up to see Isla and her crew squatting down and snapping shots.

“Y’all! We’ve been lookin’ for you two for the past twenty minutes!” She calls out to them, her hands on her hips. “Why the long faces, sweets? We got some great shots of you two on the way here- looking deeply at the marsh and all that.”

Dream can’t even pretend to muster up enthusiasm. Isla’s face drops and as soon as she looks at a silent George, realization crosses her face and she takes a seat on the boat’s bench as they draw near. The kayak bobs lazily in the wake and she reaches down to hold onto the blue plastic.

“We’re gonna tow y’all back to shore, alright? You’re lucky that guide knows the marsh like the back of his hand. You would’ve been toast when high tide came in.”

That’s all she says and then they’re off.

The ride is deathly silent and Isla kept glancing at Dream for a hint about what happened. When she doesn’t even get a look from him, she gives up and starts to flip through a photographer’s camera, muttering business underneath her breath to the crew.

They hit shore with the rest of the group already out and waiting for the two boys in front of the bus. Dream wastes no time stepping out of the kayak into the dense mud to haul George to the rocky shore before he throws his life vest off. He’s already taking impatient strides to where he

dumped his stuff when Isla jogs up to him.

“Dream! Dream, sweetie, what happened?” She calls out to him. “Did you tell George about our deal?”

Dream stops dead in his tracks, the words finally breaking the rest of his heart.

“Wait, what?” He hears George say.

“The-the deal?” Isla gasps out in confusion, “I just...I’m sorry, I assumed that’s why y’all were upset.”

“Wh...what deal?”

Dream’s world is spinning right now as he turns around. George looked confused- Dream’s grim expression making his steps falter to a stop. “Dream?” He urges.

“I- our deal,” he chokes out. “Isla knows we’re faking it, George.”

His face drops and he takes a step back. “She does?”

“She found out and...” *Fuck*. “And she said, if I was honest with you and- and told you that I loved you...we would be able to finish out our vacation here.”

The breath is knocked out of George with a gentle huff as he stands there in the middle of the parking lot, head tilted and an empty smile on his face.

“Are you serious, Dream?”

“I’m sorry,” is all he can say.

To Dream’s surprise, George’s eyes well up with tears but he quickly spins on his heel and makes a straight shot for the bus behind him and Dream doesn’t try to stop him. He watches lamely as the other couples watch George climb the bus steps in curious silence, pairs of eyes turning to him for an answer but he didn’t have one. Instead, his hands clench and unclench helplessly at the situation in front of him and caused by him.

“Oh my god,” Isla breathes. “Dream-”

“I kissed him and I didn’t remember it, but I actually did. Turns out I always loved him, but I missed my chance apparently, and whatever shot I had left went down the drain because now he definitely thinks I’m messing with him again,” Dream tells her.

A hand presses against her mouth. She’s smart enough not to say anything after that.

The ocean and the sky didn’t touch today- the sky kept itself cloaked with its gray clouds and the sea kept its tide as low as possible. He and George were even further apart now and there was nothing he could do to save them.

Against the harsh gazes of everyone else, Dream forces his legs to carry him to the bus and he climbs on, keeping his eyes down and taking the row of seats across from George. His friend never turned and looked at him for the entirety of the ride back. In all fairness, Dream didn’t look at him either.

With secrets out and nothing else to be said, Dream felt himself inhale the cold saltwater that flooded his chest and it soaks into the groves of his broken heart, irritating and burning the tender

muscle until his fingers curled into tight fists in his lap in invisible pain. The glass felt sticky against his warm skin and the water was a stormy green underneath the highway as they shot back to the Keys, the sky a muted, dull color that showed no sign of clearing. Dream was drowning all the way back to the resort- salt and sand rubbing his throat and eyes raw, but he finally accepted the icy water and he let it flood into his blood, dulling the ache in his body until he didn't feel much of anything.

Maybe that was good, maybe that was bad.

Dream can see George's face swing towards him in the window's reflection and his green eyes float up to meet his. The reflection painted a ghostly image of George with his arms wrapped around himself, the thick clear wall creating an imaginary divide between them. Dream can see the words burning the back of George's tongue because his brown eyes searched Dream's reflection with an uncertain urge. But, Dream looks away.

A few days ago, he would've given anything to know what George was going to say.

The ocean blurs from the travel and the world continues to turn even when George goes back to his own window, the unspoken words left to fade like a dying star.

**2:10 p.m**

It was hard for them to talk. Dream wanted to- he really, really did- he would give anything to try to get George on his side again. If he had the courage, he would've sat right next to George and begged his friend to listen to him. However, Dream had his own being to look out for because it's not like George was the softest when it came to turning down someone's feelings.

He didn't move to go chase after George once the bus pulled into the resort. He was the first one off and Dream allowed the other people to climb off before he cut in front of Isla and bounded down the hollow steps, stepping out onto the slippery concrete. Misty raindrops fell onto and coated the lush greenery with dew, making the air taste sweet and new in Dream's lungs.

He takes his first step to the resort doors, alone.

"Dream!"

Isla's voice made Dream cringe, but he stopped. She held her clipboard above her head and her eyes were big and soft, almost motherly, as she approached him with an outstretched arm.

"Sweetie, I am so sorry about that," she apologizes. Dream doesn't forgive her, but he lets her talk as she threads her arm around Dream's. "You sure have one heck of a situation in front of ya, huh?"

He coughs. "A bit, yeah."

"Well, I'm gonna make it up to y'all, alright? I promise you, this will be good."

"What is it?"

"It's a ball," she explains. Her fingers tap against Dream's arm to get his attention before she points a sharp nail to the front of the resort, forcing him to acknowledge the fact that George had stopped dead in his tracks and was watching them talk from underneath the overhang. His hair was curling around his ears from the humidity and in the light from the lobby behind him, George seemed to glow. Dream hates how his heart flutters.

“-So y’all just need to show up and you’ll be off the hook.”

Dream looks down at her. “Wait, repeat that?”

“The dance classes?” She says, a knowing smile on her lips. Dream’s face must’ve dropped because she rushes to add, “I know that is the last thing you two want to do right now, but I promise you, this is the last event you guys will be photographed for. The ball is thrown to kinda thank all the couples for workin’ with us here. The dance classes are...they’re required by the resort because it is a more ‘uniform’ thing to do and they’re using it as a scapegoat to force couples to get close to one another for a few shots.”

“Isla, that sounds awful.”

“I know, but you gotta, sweetie. Just one more time- can you fake it one more time?”

Dream licks his lips and George leans against the white pole of the resort, staring at them with such a deep intensity, Dream felt it pulse through his ribs. George’s head knocks against the pole, his eyes closing for a moment as he feels the mist fall onto his skin and Dream can see the water collect in small beads on his dark hair. In the rain, he looked like a walking starry galaxy- the water forming constellations on his body as he waited for Dream to give him their room key.

Dream wants to tell her that he doesn’t have to fake it, that if things went differently, they could give her what she actually wanted. Yet, George opens his eyes and stares at him with a missing spark that once zipped through his irises.

“Sure,” Dream tells her. “One more time.”

She squeezes his arm and pulls away. “Five o’clock, Dream. I’ll make sure to make it up to y’all.”

He didn’t like the way her tone shifted into something vague, but she walks away and past George, giving him a small greeting before disappearing deep into the resort. Dream follows her and when he reaches the doors, George was already following him.

“What did she say?” George asks.

“Dance class at five.”

“Dream-”

“I know. But the resort says it’s required and we signed that contract, so we have to go,” Dream tells him dryly as they wait for the elevator. The doors whoosh open and George presses the button for them, waiting for the doors to shut.

When they’re alone, George speaks. “We need to fake it, right?”

“It’s just one more time. It’s the least we can do for Isla after ruining the marsh for her.”

George nods in agreement. The elevator carries them up to their floor and the doors open, but Dream doesn’t get off. He digs into his pocket for their keys and he tosses them to George before slamming his fists to the first-floor button.

“Where are you going?” George asks him.

“I dunno.”

The doors close and the elevator pulls Dream down lower and lower, bringing him closer to sea.

???

*The depths of Dream were much more cluttered than he originally thought- dozens of sunken chests littered the seafloor and a few were propped open with their contents buried into the sand of his subconscious.*

*Dream opened his eyes and the salt water didn't burn them. His chest didn't ache for air. It seemed like he was simply standing on the sand like he was standing on a beach- in fact, if it weren't for the fish and bubbles swirling around him, Dream would've thought he was on a beach somewhere.*

*His clothes float in the water when he moves and his hair waves like seaweed above him as he tries to swim up to the surface, but the second his feet leave the bottom, he's yanked to the same spot he was. Dream couldn't talk, it felt like someone stole his vocal cords- his voice turning into thousands of tiny bubbles spilling out of his mouth.*

*There's a heavy chain around his ankles that rubs his skin pink. He takes it into his hands and follows the links to a new chest that sat neatly behind him, its lid still locked and golden.*

*Dream falls to his knees, running his hands over the polished wood.*

*"You know you can open it," a voice says.*

*Dream's head whirls around him and he presses his back against the chest like he was trying to protect it. The ocean floor was dark and he couldn't see more than ten feet around him, nothing but an invisible light giving him a dim hint of his surroundings. He couldn't see the shimmer of the surface either when he looked up. The disembodied voice was coming from somewhere- someone- but there was nothing. Just Dream.*

*Who are you? Dream wanted to ask. There's no response though, of course there's not.*

*Dream rolls his eyes and goes back to the chest, trying to push it open.*

*"No, not like that, idiot- use the key."*

*The sand stirs and Dream stares at himself. Not as in the way he would a mirror, but it was literally him- a copy of his face and skin. This Dream had green streaks hidden in his hair and salt particles dotted his cheeks to replace his freckles. Pearl rings decorated his fingers and colors of coral reefs branched underneath his skin and clustered in a brightly colored mass where his heart was. This Dream was the embodiment of the ocean and he stood powerfully behind the chest, looking down at his weak counterpart.*

*Dream furrows his eyebrows in confusion.*

*"Hold on, do you not have the key yet? I would've thought for sure you would've figured it out by now," he says to himself, squatting down to meet his eyes. This Dream's eyes were a clash of different greens and blues that seemed to shift and swirl every time he moved them. "Oh, wait... you still don't know what happened, do you?"*

*Dream doesn't move.*

*"You forgot you kissed him," Dream starts, swirling his hands in the water to form bubbles shaped like two bodies. The bubbles mingle together and Dream blushes, looking away. "But then you spend your time here hoping you get to all over again. You want George, Dream, you know you do- but it's your own ignorance that drove him away."*



*Dream shakes his head. George was far out his reach now.*

*“The truth is, he’s not gone. You have time to turn this around.”*

*Dream’s fingers dig into the sand as he glares up at himself, his pain leaking ink to the water and clouding the space between them.*

*“You have that ball, Dream. Don’t be an idiot. Get that key,” Dream bends down, trailing his fingertips along the wood, “and grow the fuck up.”*

Dream’s eyes flutter open and the ocean laps against the rocks gently, foam collecting in soft tufts around the surface. He had his knees drawn up and his arms pulled them close to his face to hide himself, but there was no use in hiding if his inner self was now lecturing him to fix his mistake.

Moments pass with each beat of a wave and Dream stands, raising his arms above his head, stretching to the hidden sky, before letting them drop down at his sides. Maybe it was time for him to grow up- admit his faults and, instead of begging for George to try again, move on just like George did. Something could’ve worked between them and the two passed each other like ships in the night and that was okay. It hurt, but it was okay.

Dream takes a deep breath.

*It was okay.*

**5:15 p.m**

One thing about Dream that he didn’t tell a lot of people was that he was a good dancer. Sure, he couldn’t break dance or kick his legs up like a ballerina, but he knew how to find the rhythm in a song and he knew the basics enough to not stumble and trip over himself. He can thank his mom for signing him and his sister up for ballroom classes.

Dream tilts his neck to the side, rubbing the cramp out of his worn muscle from looking down at George’s chaotic feet. They’ve barely started and it already proved to be a chore for the two.

“Alright, take a break and we’ll come back to it,” the instructor says.

George couldn’t have looked more relieved and he excuses himself to the bathroom while Dream waves him off, taking a seat on the floor with his back against the large mirror. The resort had rented out the yoga room in the gym for the small cluster of couples and the place gave off the least romantic setting in the whole resort. The place reeked of rubber and sweat, the sweet smell of Febreeze mixing with those, and it was hard to gaze lovingly into each other’s eyes when the instructor stood right next to everyone and watched like a hungry hawk.

*Wonder if he wants in,* Dream had thought when he caught the guy’s gaze on him and George. It was awkward and the other couples seemed to have a natural chemistry with each other- their bodies and hands molding effortlessly together.

“How ‘ya doin’, Dream?” Isla asks as she crouches down in front of him. Dream takes a swig of his water and shrugs.

“I dunno, uh, could be worse.”

“That’s awesome, I am just... *so* happy to hear that,” her voice sounds tight and high and Dream puts his bottle down, reading between the lines.

“You want us to do more, don’t you?”

Isla winces. “Do you mind?”

“No,” he sighs. He did mind though.

“Thanks, darlin’.” The door swings open and George walks back in, his cheeks flushing pink, and Isla makes a small noise before excusing herself.

Dream stands and George folds his arms across his chest, the two studying Isla in the corner of the room.

“How much longer?” George asks.

“How am I supposed to know?”

“You keep signing us up for this stuff, I dunno.”

Dream rolls his eyes. “We’re not close to being done, George.”

George scoffs.

“Why? You have a date or something?” Dream snides. The joke falls flat because of his shitty timing and George gives him a side-eye.

“Not with you.”

“Thanks for that, George.”

“You asked!”

“We’re supposed to be pretending to be in love and I don’t think we’re doing a great job at selling that if you’re whining like a little bitch the whole time.”

George snorts and shakes his head. “I think that’s what normal couples do.”

*I can’t argue with that*, Dream admits and he gives George a slight nod to show his agreement. The other couples here, though, were like *super* couples- those people you see all over Instagram that flaunts their perfect relationship and always repost healthy communication tips with a dramatic retelling of their first and only fight together. Everyone here looked like they would be in an ad for a resort and Dream couldn’t help but feel a little insecure with how cold they must look to other people.

A part of Dream really wishes he had what he saw. Deep down, he ached for the heat of love to warm the cold water in his chest.

The instructor claps his hands above his head. “Everyone back to it!”

Like nothing happened, George and Dream find each other in the room and his body pulls to George’s like a one-sided magnetic attraction. With one hand wrapping around George’s waist gingerly and George’s hand settling into his palm, their feet scruff awkwardly against the floor to the swell of violins and piano keys. George was barely humoring Dream with eye contact, let alone acknowledgment, and Dream felt conflicting emotions clash in his head. On one hand, having George this close and in his arms made his stomach flutter and a light blush stain his cheeks. On the other hand, having George this close and in his arms felt like a cruel, cruel joke on Isla’s part.

Dream's foot steps on an uneven surface and George flinches. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"It's fine," George replies and that was the end of that conversation.

Until George kicked the side of Dream's shoe. Then Dream trips on George's toes. After that, George steps forward too far and completely crushes Dream's foot.

"Okay, this isn't working," George growls and he throws Dream's hands off him, taking a few steps back in frustration. A few eyes turned to them, but most couple's just kept to themselves and continued with their quiet conversations.

"George, we had it-"

"You messed up the rhythm when you stepped on my foot."

"Yeah? Which time?" Dream asks. He can see Isla behind George, giving him a pointed look to the bored photographer standing next to her. A long sigh escapes his lips and he holds out his hand to George. "One more time, then we can leave."

George hesitates, staring down at his open hand. If what George told Dream is true, then somewhere, deep down, he wants to take Dream's hand and try again. Dream just hoped George saw the same thing in him.

"Fine. One more time," George agrees. His slender fingers gently nestle into Dream's palm and Dream yanks him in close- partly for comedic effect and partly to keep George from changing his mind.

He hears George gasp at the movement, his body shooting forward with his free hand placed firmly against Dream's chest to stop himself from tripping straight into him. His hand felt like thunder clouds against Dream's ribcage and it shot lighting straight to his heart and vibrated his nerves to make them all too aware of the intimate touch. Dream prays George didn't feel his heart race underneath his palm and luckily, George pulls his hand back as fast as he placed it and awkwardly lays his forearm on Dream's shoulder like he did before.

The music is gentle and quiet in the room. George's shaky breathing pricked at Dream's skin and made goosebumps appear up and down his arms, his body reacting to his friend's presence despite the intense heartache that he put him through. It was pathetic. Dream felt betrayed by his own body.

Dream ducks his head down and focuses on George's clumsy feet. "It's in three's, George."

"What is?"

"The steps. You're counting it in two's."

"Oh," George says lamely. *Is he embarrassed?* Dream looks at George's face through his eyelashes and sure enough, George was looking the completely opposite way and his whole body seemed to tense up at the correction.

"It's fine, it's an easy fix," Dream assures. "Just...hang on," he stops their movements, waiting for the beat of the piano to pick back up so he can restart their dance, "okay, ready?"

"No."

"It's...one, two, three- one, two, three," Dream counts to him as he moves his feet to the numbers.

It takes George a minute to get on the same page, but eventually, their feet sync up into identical movements, falling just inches of each other after each step. Dream keeps the slow pace for George and he stands up straighter. “There you go- just easy one, two, three’s.”

George doesn’t say anything in his concentration. His eyebrows were knitted together, dark eyes straining to pay close attention to his movement, and his lips pressed together in an adorable display of focus that brought an easy smile onto Dream’s face.

Dream feels his heart glow, pushing against the breaks that had formed.

As violins sing, Dream tightens his grip on George’s hand selfishly. George’s hand still felt smooth and cool- but a warm tingle snaked from his fingertips to Dream’s arm. His instinct told him to draw George in closer since they still had the unnatural amount of space between them for a couple’s dance, but he didn’t. Instead, he adjusted his hand on George’s waist by pushing it towards his spine more, putting more pressure against his back as they grew more comfortable with the swaying movements.

He feels George draw in a slow breath.

Dream sees Isla moving her arms wildly to get his attention. *Pull him in! Pull him! In!* She mouths to him, jabbing an excited finger to George.

*What?!* He mouths back. She makes a face and nods her chin to the camera and Dream fights the urge to groan. Granted, the timing was right. George seemed more relaxed now that he knew the steps and Dream’s position was open enough to close the gap.

Nerves make his stomach flip and he can feel sweat prick at his temples and palms. But, very slowly, Dream secures his grip on George before he pulls his arm back and pushes George’s waist in, making his friend step right against his chest.

Isla throws her arms up in the air in a silent victory and points to them just as the photographer lifts his camera and snaps a shot. The flash flickers through the room and the celebration is over.

For the few seconds George pressed against Dream, it was amazing. George felt heavy and alive in his arms and he smelled like cheap hotel shampoo and saltwater. His body heat sank deep into Dream and soothed the hurt that never left his bones and, for a moment, it gave Dream a taste of what it would’ve felt like to be an actual couple at the resort. It was like ecstasy for Dream- his head spun and his heart pushed against his ribs, it felt so full.

Then, George stepped back.

“They get it?” He asks. Dream blinks at him, freezing in his place completely like a deer in headlights. “The picture?”

“Uh, y...yeah. Yeah, we’re good.”

George smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Okay...good.”

Then, he leaves. It was sudden and fast- Dream could barely process that George had peeled Dream’s hands off of him before he booked it out of the yoga room, leaving a freezing void where he once stood. Even when the doors shut behind George, Dream stared at them in a dazed state.

*Go*, a voice deep in his mind urges.

And he does.

Dream shoves through the doors and exits the gym, searching the resort halls for a clue to where George went. He paced the golden, leafy halls and glanced out the tall windows for George's face in the crowd, but he couldn't find him. Even when he stood outside their room, Dream pressed his ear against the door and heard dead silence on the other side.

George was gone.

8:00 p.m

The day moved in a fast blur after that, but that was mainly because Dream slept through it. As stupid as it sounds, he was trying to get back to that weird dream world again so he could figure out what he was actually thinking. It didn't work. He ended up being so exhausted, he passed out sprawled on their bed with a pillow tucked underneath his arm.

When he did wake up, the room was a fading orange and the sun had just shown its face for the first time that day. The room was warm and Dream felt a familiar comfort ease into his chest as he blinked the sleep away from his eyes, digging his palm into them to clear his vision, and he sat up on his elbows.

The resort was quiet. The beach was quiet. There was nothing but gentle breathing and the soft crash of the waves. The curtains fluttered in the wind and everything looked perfect.

The sky melts into the ocean and Dream turns his head.

George laid next to him, his back turned and body curled up in a ball. One hand rested next to his face and the other clung limply to his arm, lips parted and puffed out with gentle breaths as he slept. For the first time that day, Dream didn't see the lingering flicker of pain in his features.

There was one day left ahead of them. He can fix this.

There was something so much more to them and that was worth saving.

## Chapter End Notes

thank you to my editor @honkshyy (on twt) they literally sat w me for hours and helped me plan out an ending to this bitchass story teehee

keep your eyes peeled for an ending, i also have tons of new works in progress <3

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Chapter Notes

heres to the new year <3 thank you for sticking with me on this crazy story

June 20

*The night the moon melted into the sea*

*There was an old tale in his family that generations used to share to help their children overcome the complicated feelings they felt inside. He remembers his mom sitting next to him in his bed, a finger twisting one of his loose curls, and her voice would always be so hushed it forced Dream to close his eyes and calm down to listen to her. Her whispers about the forbidden love between the sky and sea reminded him of the waves and the familiar crunch of sand in his toes. It warmed his stomach and chest with a hopeful glow- like he was a bear feeling the sun on its skin after a long winter.*

*It's been years since he's heard the tale, yet, Dream always kept the ocean close because he was the ocean. He was the beach and sand. He was the ever-changing marsh and estuary that flowed into the deep, unknown water of the sea. He was as wild as a hurricane. As beautifully complex and as dangerous as the ocean itself.*

*But, Dream would never know what it would be like to be the sky. He never knew how airy and how careless George felt at times. He never felt the weightless ecstasy of feeling everything all at once- just like how the sun beams down on the planet and watches it all. Dream would never know how dark things got when the sky blocks itself away with storms and clouds or how the moon, despite its brightness, never knew exactly where it was going. In the dead of night, the moon could only see itself on the surface of the sea- guiding itself to its very edge until it melts down into brilliant colors for the sun to drag across the sky.*

*Dream would never know what the sky felt like, but he had a pretty good idea.*

*See, in the tale, the sea and the sky loved one another, but they couldn't be together because the sun was far too hot and would evaporate the ocean's waters. In comparison, the sea could never reach up to the heavens without swallowing the land and life around it. The two were forced to continue on with their lives- always churning and rotating around each other like it was a never-ending dance.*

"You think he'll show?" Isla asks in a hushed tone.

"He knows he has to," he insists.

Dream pulls the cuffs of his rental suit down a bit to keep his hands busy as his green eyes sweep the dark room full of faces. These were the final hours in the resort and everybody was letting go- grudges, fights, stress- it all melted away as the stringed instruments swelled the air up with their heavenly chorus. The night had just started and it was already over for some.

It was supposed to be a wrap-up party, but since the ad managers had full control and access to the

checkbook, the cafeteria had turned into the deep sea in just a few hours. Guests came in black tie attire and were handed green and blue glow sticks to keep on their wrists. Glittering streamers and shimmering lights snaked up the glass dome above their head and brought color to the starry sky on the other side of it. Muted blue lights lit the empty space around them as glowing fish hung down from the ceiling above their heads- fading in and out, casting flashes of different colors on the faces of the people. It was gorgeous.

“Dream.” Isla’s elbow knocks against his, her other hand gesturing to the entrance doors.

*In some ways, the dance was all about waiting for the other to make the move. The ocean was far too prideful and stubborn to admit the danger of their love and the sun was too scared to do anything- knowing that one wrong move could dry up its lover. Sometimes, the ocean would swell up to pull the sun down against its wishes and other times, the sun would edge too close to the water and leave the other scorched.*

*For a while, it seemed like they would never reach each other.*

George’s face is half shadow and half blue in the light. He looks calm. Cool. It was like the suit he wore was his armor as his dark eyes scanned the area, seeming hesitant to walk too far in. But, he takes small steps forward with shadows breaking on his face like glass, casting geometric shapes on his pale skin as he moves carefully. His eyes fill with stars when he looks up and Dream looks down at the waving blue light as his chest vibrates with the music.

It’s been a full day and George hasn’t spoken to him, let alone looked at him.

But it was alright. Dream had a plan.

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” Isla whispers, urging him to move to George from the other side of the room.

So, Dream walks.

*Then, one day, the sun flared and demanded that the sea tell the earth how much it loved the sky so it could join the heavens. The sun, in the midst of its emotions, forgot about how stuck the sea is on the planet.*

*“I am wedged between pieces of land. If you weren’t so hot, you would be able to come down to me,” the sea said.*

*The dance continued, neither seeing the other’s reasoning and neither patient enough to change themselves.*

His steps are faster, more certain, than George’s. He’s pushing through the crowd of people and craning his neck to spot his friend over the heads of people.

“George!” Dream shouts over the music.

George stops walking in the center of the dance floor, staring at Dream with tired eyes as the glow of fish above him sinks a deep purple into his skin. The lights twinkle on his skin and, for some strange reason, it was comforting to see the night sky on George. He looked ethereal.

Dream freezes. People push themselves further between them.

*There was a third perspective in this tale that no one talks about, but Dream always wondered about. The earth was attached to the sea and relied on the sky to take care of its life, so what did the earth see during this dance? How did the earth feel?*

*Truth is, he never got that answer until now. The earth turned itself just so the ocean could always follow the sky, and it cleared its face for the sun so it could see it's beloved better. The earth was a silent supporter of their love, knowing it couldn't solve their problems, but doing everything it could to make things a little bit easier.*

His throat was dry and anxiety made his legs heavy. He knew the ocean within himself was driving its water deeper, like how a horse digs its hooves into the earth to resist moving, but in a new twist, he felt a wave build against his spine. It crept from his tailbone to his shoulder blades before it drove itself forward with unstoppable energy, slamming into his chest and heart. The force made his feet move through the barrier of bodies with a newfound sense of courage. Dream's ocean felt drawn to that sky he saw in George.

"George," Dream breathes out, but it's too quiet.

George's mouth is open slightly like he was getting ready to say something. There was a heaviness to his expression that pulled the corners of his eyes down in an exhausted sadness. There was no fight or flare to anything.

Dream is in front of him now, standing toe to toe with the piece of fallen sky.

*This is where Dream diverts away from the tale to make his own story. The tale ends with a compromise between the sky and sea- the sky agreeing to cool off at night so the ocean could get as close as possible without flooding the world. They agreed to meet at the horizon at the end of every night to kiss each other goodbye.*

*But here, there was no compromise. The sky had already shown itself and done everything the sea wanted. Now, it was the sea's turn to go to the sky.*

"I didn't lie to you when I said I loved you," Dream says. "I'm sorry I didn't realize it sooner and I'm sorry I was too scared to even acknowledge what I felt until I had to."

George's eyes roam his face. He has the sky's attention.

"George, I-this whole trip has been a complete mess. Honestly, they..." He sighs, "they only came to me for a shoutout in our next video and I had said yes because my parents wanted to go, so I thought I could get them a trip or something. Then, they asked if we were dating and, George, I swear to God, I didn't even think when I said yes- not because I wanted a free vacation, but because I wanted *you*."

Dream sucks in a breath, the truth knocking him breathless. "I didn't think it would be hard. I didn't think I would hurt you this much."

George doesn't look scared or angry. He looks spellbound by Dream's confession and his eyebrows scrunch for a moment like he was trying to process everything- putting the pieces together deep in his mind. Above, the colors drown his face in a turquoise, highlighting the color rising to George's cheekbones.

"I didn't say I love you because I had to. I said I loved you because I wanted to and I was too stubborn and terrified with everything to even-" Dream stops himself, shaking his head to keep from oversharing. He reaches down and grabs George's hands, their bracelets snapping together in the green-blue glow on their wrists. "I knew what you were saying in that tidal pool- I always knew and I've always felt the same thing."

There's no response, but George seems to be drawn closer to Dream's space- the sun creeping



closer to the water. Dream's chest is burning at the closeness, but he needs to keep talking.

"I am an idiot, but if I had the opportunity to do all of this again- I would do it in a heartbeat, George." Dream had seen the shadow of the moon and he loved it. "But, I need you to at least tell me this one thing...okay?"

George closes his mouth and waits.

"Is the star still burning? Or am I really looking at a dead one?"

There's a stretch of silence as George thought, but he never moved his hands away from Dream's. Instead, his eyes softened and he smiled.

"Dream?"

"Yeah?"

"You *are* an idiot."

Then, without giving Dream a second to respond, George takes his hands and pulls Dream's face down to his with his fingers nestled in his loose curls. Their lips pressed together as their noses knock against one another awkwardly, but instead of stepping back, Dream feels George smile against his mouth and tilt his head, kissing him like they were the only people in the room.

When George kisses him, colors of a nebula dance behind Dream's eyes and he moves in closer, his hands going from George's face to his torso in a bear hug. Hugging and kissing George breathlessly, Dream holds him to his chest and says every word he never got to say.

George feels like fire on a cold day. He feels like that first sip of hot chocolate after spending hours out in the snow, and it made Dream dizzy. His nerves felt like they were brought back to life against the cold sea and his blood ran like magma through his veins as George's starlight kickstarted Dream's heart, making it swell until it felt like it was ready to burst. Dream wanted this. He wanted George and he got him.

His boyfriend tasted like lemon candy and the hidden blue in constellations. Dream finally could feel what the sky felt and it was *beautiful*.

George's hand trails from his face down to his chest, placing an open palm right over his racing heart. For once, it wasn't pounding out of fear and nerves.

It was pounding because of love.

Dream pulls away for a second before he presses their foreheads together. As George catches his breath, fingers playing with strands of Dream's hair, Dream drags his lips lightly across George's freckles, kissing each and every one of them. It made George shy away with an easy grin, so Dream pressed a long kiss to the corner of George's eye, yearning to take in every ounce of him.

"So much for making that promise, huh?" George groans, slamming his face into Dream's shoulder. He could feel the blush radiate heat off George's skin and it makes Dream chuckle lightly, wrapping secure arms around him.

"Eh, we both know that was more for you than me."

"Shut up."

Dream pulls him back so he can look at George's face. "Let's make a new promise then. One we can *actually* keep."

"Yeah? About what?"

He pauses to think for a moment before something sparks behind his eyes, his face lifting into a mischievous expression.

"Promise me," Dream says, holding out his pinky to George with his eyes still gazing at the sun in front of him, "that you'll give us a shot."

George hesitates as he looks down at the pinky in front of him. Sure Dream fucked up a lot but he got there eventually, right? George hooked his own pinky around Dream's confidently, probably wondering why he even needed to promise that to begin with.

"Trust me, I promise," he responds in a tease. Dream looks at him with a slow smile spreading on his face as the stars twinkle around them, the colors of the sea melting on their faces. George grins back at him because he couldn't help but feel like he just made the greatest decision ever.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

# epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They were awake long enough to see the dawn of their last morning rise in fiery colors over the sea. Their hotel room was frigid with the resort's relentless, but comforting, air conditioning and ocean breeze, so it was no brainer that the two boys were found nestled against one another- legs tangled with chests together. Two hearts finally beating as one.

"Dream, stop breathing in my face- I can literally taste the shrimp you ate, ugh."

Dream burrows his cold face into the side of George's neck. "You love me."

"Keep poking me with your cold nose and you'll see how fast that can change."

Dream doesn't stop. "Love doesn't follow rules, *Georgie*. You'll love me either way."

George laughs and it sounds like a star's twinkle. His hand hooks on the back of Dream's neck, holding on to him when he brushes his lips over Dream's in a fast, shy kiss. The air sparks between them and Dream smiles. He would never get tired of kissing George.

Holding a piece of the universe was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and Dream was lucky that a star was giving him the chance to even get close to it. Most people have to buy fancy equipment to catch a glimpse of its stunning beauty, but Dream had it right here in his arms.

Discovering something new about the ocean was a thrilling experience that doesn't happen often, but George struck gold when he broke through its crushing depths and lured out something too beautiful to be hidden anymore. Dream's love was one of those glowing creatures found in the Mariana Trench- a fragment of light in the darkest of places.

The world outside settles as the ocean and heavens link back together- dark water stilling as it lets the sky bleed into it. At the same time, Dream and George were finally falling asleep, holding onto each other tightly with the ocean's forehead pressed against the universe's neck. Both kept each other's secrets safe because both knew what it felt like to be unknown.

But they had each other now. They can finally tell their stories and keep them safe under the waves and next to supernovas.

Dream presses a final kiss against George's neck and a shooting star falls into the sea.

## Chapter End Notes

yk when i started this story, i really did not expect it to receive this much love and connection- but then again anyone can say that about any of the stories they write. tidal pools and stars started as an ambitious, huge project that let me put my new editor/beta reader to work and in an ironic twist, this story ultimately led to us dating.

there are a lot of emotions and nostalgia behind this story folks. a lot. this story was written throughout tommy's exile arc and dream being in prison, the rise of heat

waves, my own emotional journey with falling in love- so this story will always be a reminder of that time and will always be my favorite story i have ever written. i hate getting sappy but finishing this story after a full year+ (with some breaks...so sorry yall), is like amazing to me. your support- every comment, kudo, hit i got, i treasured so so much. i hope yall enjoyed it as much as i did writing it.

heres to everyones ocean or sky <3

## End Notes

im funny: @passmethemo11y on twt

HUGE thank you to my editor: @honkshyguy

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